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THE RECALCITRANT
DISTENTIO OF RICOEUR’S TIME
AND NARRATIVE

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Abstract

Time and Narrative delineates a line of inquiry that begins with Ricoeur’s (re)formulation in Part I of Aristotelian μῦθος, towards his subsequent renegotiation of the problem of eternity and temporality that pivots on the opposed conceptions of time in Kant and Husserl. This outline of the project’s philosophical trajectory is useful and accurate, but also crucially partial because it underestimates the role played throughout the project by Augustine’s Confessions. Set at the outset by Ricoeur in explicit dialectic with the Poetics, Ricouer’s emphasis on time’s evanescence is crystallised in his valorisation of the Augustinian distentio. In Part I the distentio serves as the ongoing phenomenological counterpart to the Aristotelian triad of beginning, middle, and end, and is understood to inform the resultant formulation of a threefold mimesis. The distentio comes subsequently to assume an independent life in the text: rather than subsumed to the philosophical debate about time, it returns to condition every formulation and reformulation of it in Sections II–IV of Time and Narrative. This article begins by rehearsing Ricoeur’s reading of the Confessions to underscore his (admittedly controversial) refusal to endorse a reading that resolves the human distentio in divine extentio. It then traces the consequence of this for Ricoeur’s formulations first of the threefold mimesis, and then in recurrent form of the relation of fictive and historical narration. The distentio, I argue, is best understood as ‘recalcitrant’—necessarily resistant to encompassing formulation—because Ricoeur sees it as essential to his reformulation, announced at the end of Section I, of the Heideggerian problem of ‘being-toward-death’ as the concurrent experience of death as final, and as that beyond which we are nonetheless able to think. Such a conception requires an ontological predicate of time that is itself beyond narrative—even as narrative proves essential to its expression.

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Discussions of *Time and Narrative* tend to privilege Ricoeur’s appropriation of Aristotle to explicate his argument about narrative: exegesis of the ‘threefold mimesis’ thus pivots on the idea of ‘emplotment’, and narratives afford plausibility structures for reality. What follows here aims to complicate such accounts by pursuing the hypothesis that the controlling emphasis in *Time and Narrative* is Augustinian, in the specific sense afforded by *Confessions*: namely, the ontology of the *distensio animi*. Ricoeur elucidates the *distensio* at commentarial length at the outset of volume one, and it conditions his thinking throughout all three volumes, in the specific sense that his iterations of the threefold mimesis figure hermeneutically Augustine’s elucidation in Book 11 of aporetic temporality. This amendment should restore Augustine as truly and fully Aristotle’s counterpart in an incipiently dialogical project. Not incidentally, it restores time to its full stature vis-à-vis narrative, and reminds us that ‘discordant concordance’ is the effect not only of narrative emplotment, but of the ontological fact of the *distensio*. Finally this dialectic is recapitulated in the sense of the ending of *Time and Narrative*, which is in fact double: the first Aristotelian, the second Augustinian.

As its readers know full well, *Time and Narrative* presents a complex, at times even tortuous argument. A second hallmark of the experience of reading it is the difficulties of discerning when Ricoeur is summarising a text or thinker, and when he is composing his own text and, with it, his own thought. Foregrounding the Augustinian dimension of *Time and Narrative* proffers address to this dilemma, and suggests that it reflects Ricoeur’s implicit acknowledgement of the *distensio* (his own project, like Augustine’s, struggles with both his own experience of the transitory nature of time and with a complex philosophical legacy) and his impulse to offer a plausible structure for experience (the idea of ‘narrated time’, Ricoeur’s ultimate reformulation of Aristotle’s conception of plot). While the text itself comes in and out of focus on this dynamic, I argue that it crystallises in Ricoeur’s formulation of ‘the presumption of truth’ and its aftermath in Section IV. Here, at the concluding moment, both Augustine and Aristotle, both the distension and emplotment, are present. At stake is rightly understanding the relationship of ontology to narrative.

A related formal point concerns the degree to which the disproportionate pages that comprise *Time and Narrative* and the present essay make inevitable that the latter telescope a complex argument. Absent line-by-line commentary—as, for example, Joel Weinsheimer has provided in exemplary fashion for Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*—there is the real risk of elision. My effort to address what I take to be an oversight in the scholarship associates this essay with an honourable company who knows first hand this struggle and abides, as do I, in the conviction that for all its challenges *Time and Narrative*
remains of signal importance for scholars of religion who judge that questions concerning ontology and the category of narrative are relevant to their work.  

The reading I propose requires detailed rehearsal of Ricoeur’s own reading of Augustine; the first section of what follows is thus both the longest and most exegetical of the essay. I then rehearse Ricoeur’s tandem reading of Aristotle, and outline the emergent descriptions respectively of the threefold mimesis, and of history and fiction as distinctive narrative forms that nonetheless in fact converge. This will enable a consideration of Ricoeur’s formulation of narrative time as, crucially and decisively, an expression of the Augustinian distensio. Not incidentally, it will also offer an account of Ricoeur’s concern—foreshadowed explicitly at the beginning of Section IV—to name, indeed to own, not only that formulation’s power, but its limits.

I. THE DISTENSIO

Time and Narrative’s opening gambit—the hypothesised circle of narrative and temporality, a space where ‘the productive imagination’ first broached in The Rule of Metaphor may be understood to work—begins by offering a reading of Book 11 of Augustine’s Confessions. Ricoeur turns to narrative in order to investigate ‘the temporal character of human experience’, and in doing so seeks to fashion a healthy (as opposed to vicious) hermeneutical circle to explore the complementary formulation that time is human time when organised as narrative, and narrative is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience. Paired with Aristotle’s Poetics, Ricoeur understands these two texts to be mirror images of one another while holding to a crucial, common methodological practice: their purposeful address of aporia, moments of dislocation or irresolution.

Given the complementary nature of the discussion, it is striking that Ricoeur chooses not to follow a chronological order and begins his investigations not with Poetics, but with Confessions. In focusing our attention on Book 11, he seeks to underscore a style that is ‘even more aporetical than Augustine would admit’.  

Each seeming resolution of an aporia in fact raises new problems. In this Ricoeur judges Augustine to be distinguished from the dominant Greek tradition extending from Plato to Plotinus: Augustine adopts an interrogative approach, abjuring the possibility of a pure phenomenology of time in recognition that time can never be described without being discussed. The rhetoric of argumentation is thus not—indeed never can be—discarded. Put differently: time is always already in the realm of hermeneutics, and our words about it are in this sense inevitably ‘practical’ rather than ‘theoretical’.

The central aporia upon which Augustine dilates in Book 11 concerns the juxtaposition of the being and non-being of time, as these are reflected in the tension between Augustine’s sense of distension and intention. In a series of
refinements Augustine arrives at a formulation of the classic sceptical argument about the existence of time: time cannot exist if the past is no longer, if the future is not yet, and if the present is not always. In this we experience the distensio. Yet Augustine also notes that language intervenes; such locutions as ‘will be’, ‘were’, and ‘are passing away’ ostensibly compare, calculate, and stipulate time. In this we discover the human intention to organise time. In a further refinement, Ricoeur observes, Augustine engages in a three-step analysis which underscores the inevitability that attempts to measure time in the periods we stipulate requires that we do so while time is passing. Expectation, memory, and attention are, for Augustine, each itself distended, and this is the impasse Augustine sketches so powerfully.

Crucial for Ricoeur to Augustine’s resolution of this impasse is a shift in grammatical usage in Confessions, in which ‘past’ and ‘future’ become adjectives rather than nouns. Ricoeur argues that this is transformativ because it opens the way to considering these temporal qualities as existing in the present moment. At this point Ricoeur foreshadows his own formulation of threefold mimesis by invoking an (as yet unpredicated) ‘threefold present’.

Yet in place of asking how we can find the future and the past, Augustine’s transformativ formulation presents a new aporia: where can we find the future and past? The new question focuses on the relation between narration (memory) and prediction (expectation). Memory as image of the past, an impression left by events that remains in the mind, contrasts with prediction as an image of the future, not an impression but a sign or cause that spawns a vocabulary of expectation. Ricoeur notes both Augustine’s overt concern that these images of past and future are themselves deeply enigmatic, and Augustine’s recourse to spatial terms. Here, Ricoeur argues, Augustine formulates what will prove to be the core aporia of time: being and non-being, focused on the measurement of time.

This formulation has its basis in the emergent sense of the dissolution of the present, and the recourse to the spatial: time not as ‘passing’, but as ‘in transit’. This echoes the sceptic claim that the present can have no extension, because we cannot measure what has no duration and is not extended into space. Thus Augustine faces a new iteration of time’s enigmatic quality: ordinary language and verbal exchange suggest both a human desire to understand this, and some sort of comprehension. Augustine takes recourse here to the rhetoric of reductio ad absurdum argument to consider examples of this enigma: theories of planetary motion, movement as only partly synchronic, light from the stars that marks out but does not itself constitute time, and our reference to spans of time that lacks cosmological reference. Augustine concludes from these cases that time is in fact the measurement of movement rather than the movement itself.

Time thus is an extension of what only remains available to be extended: the soul. From this recognition emerges a linkage of enigma with thesis: the
extension of a thing that has no extension is in fact a distension of the mind; or, put differently, the being that lacks being can also be described as a threefold present. When we recite by heart, to take an example, the aporia remains in full force if we speak of the long and short syllables of the Deus creator omnium. If we speak of the impressions the syllable make on our memory, however, we still are describing something vestigial, but we are not equating measurement with external motion and we can, in fact, compare the effects 'long' and 'short' in the mind. Crucial here is that these effects in fact remain in the mind; they are not merely in transit.

Thus the mind in recitation expects, attends, and remembers: or, as Ricoeur formulates it, the future passes through the present and into the past. Augustine's distensio is joined to the threefold present: ‘It is no longer a question of either impression-images or anticipatory images but of an action that shortens expectation and extends memory’. Questions—as always in Augustine—remain, most impenetrably that the soul 'distends' itself even as it 'engages' itself. But we can safely speak in Augustine of the crucial formulation: the present of the future, the present of the past, and the present of the present. This opens Ricoeur's final and crucial aspect of his reading of Augustine: the foreshadowing here of Aristotle's formulation of discordant concordance in the contrast of time with eternity.

Augustine articulates a set of questions around the juxtaposition of the distensio as the temporal aporia, and the eternal Word. What was God doing before the world? Why are not creatures eternal? How can the temporal come from the eternal? The stillness of eternity is so directly an antonym of distension that we are tempted proleptically to formulate eternity as a kind of Kantian limiting idea. The key for Augustine, Ricoeur argues, is the comparison of time and eternity. This is the heart of the distensio: while it solves the aporia of measurement, locating that activity not in the world but in the mind, it also testifies to a mind torn asunder between the sense we have of distention and our intentional hope in last things. Thus Augustine argues—foreshadowing, we might note, the concluding claim of Part I concerning the finality of death and the capacity to think beyond death, which Ricoeur identifies as the controlling theme of Time and Narrative—that the mind's distention finds expression in lamentation, a sorrow in finitude, which has its counterpart in praise, a celebration of the absolute. Time moves, then, in the mind, and it moves distractedly yet gestures to eternity.

II. EMPLOMENT

As noted above, the keystone of Ricoeur's bridge between Augustine and Aristotle is the pivot of the relation between discordance and concordance: where the Augustinian distensio describes an experience of discordance that
gestures to concordance, in Aristotle verbal concordance through emplotment serves to mend concordance. Reading Aristotle in the context of Augustine underscores how the focus on emplotment is silent on the matter of time: in its place, the plot offers discordance internal to concordance: the tragic μυθος thus inverts the distensio. The inversion can be formulated variously as the movement from the accidental to the intelligible, the singular to the universal, the episodic to the probable or necessary. The key to the poetic configuration, Ricoeur suggests, is Aristotle’s formulation of reversal and recognition: in this pivot to the plot, the determinate cathartic effect of pity and fear is brought into the closest possible proximity with the irreducible effect of what is at once a matter of chance and something that could not have been otherwise.

It is crucial to understanding the argument of Time and Narrative to note the very different nature of Ricoeur’s discussion of Aristotle. As he himself acknowledges at the outset, this is ‘second order’ discussion that is driven in the end by a question: can the Poetics’ concern with composition simply dwell internally, with no reference to the spectator or audience? Put differently, can the text be totally ‘closed’? Ricoeur observes that it cannot: in his terms, we have ‘structuration’ rather than ‘structure’, meaning that the plot requires a reader or spectator to achieve completion. Put differently, the sole attestation of the work’s completion is the pleasure it effects. It may be constructed by the work, but is only made actual outside it.

In closing his discussion of Aristotle, Ricoeur notes that if this is true, the work must deploy a plot, and through it imply a world, that the reader will readily appropriate. If that reader lives in the condition of distension gesturing to intention that Ricoeur locates as Augustine’s ultimate discovery, then we can understand something crucial—and, I am arguing, underestimated—about the argument of Time and Narrative: its formulation that time elicits narrative and narrative elucidates time must not obscure the fact that the controlling concern is ontological rather than textual. Texts reflect and clarify, they even offer consolation for instability; but they do not create it. Augustine comes first for Ricoeur—and elicits commentary-like exegesis—because ontology comes first. The distensio necessitates narrative, but it also conditions its possibility. As we shall see, it is also its ultimate arbiter.

III. THREEFOLD MIMESIS AND ITS ENTAILMENTS: HISTORY, FICTION, ‘NARRATED TIME’

From this, Ricoeur’s proposal of a threefold mimesis is at least clearly grounded, and can be summarised as leading into his discussions of fiction and history, respectively, and on to his concluding discussion of tradition. Threefold mimesis signals the respect in which the work of narrative is itself subject to the vagaries of the distensio as enumerated by Augustine (and elided
by Aristotle, not despite but precisely due to his stipulation of beginning, middle, and end). Narratives reflect a pre-understanding of time (mimesis 1) and the appurtenances of its signification (symbols, semantics, temporality); they represent and, crucially, mediate (mimesis 2) between past and future; and they project a reception or response that at least is a harbinger of change and should, in fact, alter the conception of temporality (mimesis 3).

Ricoeur acknowledges an incipient circularity to this formulation. We can in effect see how mimesis 3 generates a new mimesis 1, which in turn generates mimesis 2 ad infinitum. He nonetheless stands by rather than revises the formulation, towards the corollary that the circle is productive rather than vicious: that is to say, it enlarges and enhances understanding, rather than reducing or duplicating it. We see here a first foreshadowing the force of the *distensio*.

At this point, the end of Part I, Ricoeur foreshadows his ultimate goal of articulating a conception of ‘narrated time’ as a way towards ‘thinking about eternity and death at the same time’. He also announces a long but necessary detour, towards an articulation of history and fiction as the primary narrative modes that will prove essential to understanding ‘narrated time’. At this point my essay of necessity moves to Section IV of *Time and Narrative*. My justification for this telescopic leap to what Ricoeur identifies at the outset as ‘the third and last moment of mimesis’ is that we find in Section IV first, a crystallisation of the narrative properties of history and fiction and, second, Ricoeur’s argument, in the context of their delineation, for their convergence in ‘narrated time’.

Crucial to this account is that for Ricoeur, mimesis 1 is now identified with the aporetics of temporality, the grounding formulation of which we witnessed initially in Augustine. Recalled in this context of the incipient circularity of the threefold mimesis, we can begin to see that the generous treatment of Augustine not only established the aporetic quality of time but the blueprint for the hermeneutical circle of ever more productive understanding. We do need to move beyond Augustine in the specific sense that we need to arrive at a third practice, between history and fiction, which Ricoeur characterises as ‘time-consciousness’. Ricoeur here also observes that the tension between Augustine and Aristotle was iterated in the debate of Heidegger with Husserl; behind this is Ricoeur’s conviction—here stated explicitly as the modern version of the aporia of time—that phenomenology and cosmology are each irreducible to the other. Following this opening invocation, Augustine is less foregrounded in the argument of Section IV. Yet we shall see that the *distensio* is the implicit conditioning agent of ‘narrated time’ and, without question, the explicit ground from which Ricoeur will express the limits of the project of ‘narrated time’ and through which he will articulate his ultimate ethical claim. First, however, we must discuss the distinction between
history and fiction, and then their hypothesised convergence in 'narrated time'.

The pivotal difference between history and fiction concerns reference. Her focus on documentation means that the historian seeks to reach what was but no longer is. History expresses a debt to the past, comprised both in the affirmation that 'something happened' and the obligation to attend to the documentation of the occurrence. Fiction, in contrast, imagines variations on time: written retrospectively, as if in the past, in fact it works inversely from history to re-inscribe time's aporetic quality. Behind this juxtaposition is a contrast between history as standing for the real past, and fiction for the convergence of the worlds of the reader and the text. Yet, Ricoeur notes, this difference so articulated elicits parallels in reading. In their relation to documents, historians may adopt a hypothesis of sameness (Collingwood's re-enactment), or of otherness (de Certeau's 'pertinent absence') or of analogue (White's tropes). In their relation to narrators, readers of novels may similarly adopt a hypothesis of sameness (reliability), distanciation (unreliability), or analogy (responsive to form).

These parallels, crucially set in the context of different frames of reference, allow Ricoeur to articulate a complementarity in which history and fiction each use the other to reconfigure time. History uses fiction because the more precise its reconstruction of the past, the more necessary its use of imagination. Historians inflect their narrative re-figurations with horror, or admiration, or a mixture of the two. Fiction uses history in its incipient retrospection, its writing of events 'as if past'. This is the ultimate articulation of the hermeneutical circle with reference to 'narrated time'. If a convergence of history and fiction can occur and can be productive, it must be on these terms.

Correlate to his demarcation of history and fiction, Ricoeur's 'narrated time' has two aspects: a 'space of experience' and a 'horizon of expectation'. These aspects serve a final formulation of the aporetics of time: an expectation of the future, a reception of the past, and an experience of the present. Ricoeur notes that this serves to characterise a time of initiative—we have paid scant attention to Ricoeur's passing remark at the outset that the project of Time and Narrative is ultimately about action—that involves both action and suffering. As such it must reflect both our ways of living and our hopes and fears. This is crystallised in a Qoheleth-like pronouncement: expect no utopias, and stipulate no past that is set in stone.

IV. TRADITION

Enter traditio. Ricoeur's triadic articulation mimics the threefold mimesis necessitated by the dis tensio: traditionality, the formal concept, articulates what is past, and corresponds to pre-understanding; traditions, the material
concept, articulates the way in which traditions put questions to us in the present moment, and corresponds to representation; and tradition, the debate, establishes the claim of the past to be true and to afford us inherited prejudgments that engage us in crucial questions of legitimacy and authority. Traditionality reflects the aporetics of time, formulated here as the unmistakable and unmistakably disjunctive past. Traditions are here history and fiction, the varieties of narrative that give expression to the experience of time in the present moment. Tradition is narrated time, the synthetic moment of thought going forward from past into future.

Animating this is, for Ricoeur, the key question that drives the concluding pages of the project: is a tradition its own judge and jury, or does reason have a place? At stake here is the way that the resources of history and fiction can allow us to think about continuity and discontinuity using the resources of the past to affect the future in the present. Ricoeur unmistakably regards this formulation as expressing agency, towards change: we are to negotiate ‘effective history’ and ‘imaginative variation’ towards a synthesis of experience and expectation in a ‘presumption of truth’—a formulation that is stable in the moment, but open to revision. To do so is to live in ‘narrated time’, and thus to balance a debt to the past with an agency towards something we will not be able to observe, much less fully see.

V. THE RECALCITRANT DISTENTIO

It does no discredite to Ricoeur’s articulation of the ethical as narrated time in the public square that it is not his final word on the project that is Time and Narrative. It is all the same striking that, in a variation of Frank Kermode’s observation that novels often have two beginnings, Time and Narrative has two endings. The first, just rehearsed, we might term the Aristotelian conclusion: an articulation of mimesis 3, or the catharsis of Poetics reformulated for public life. This second ending, titled ‘Conclusions’, we might term the Augustinian conclusion. In these pages Ricoeur articulates his sense that this extended inquiry has in fact gestured to, but failed fully to identify, ‘another aporia of time, more deeply rooted than the preceding ones’ (7). This deeper aporia, which yet remains, mandates that he now consider the extent to which its identification bespeaks a limit to the capacity to achieve a ‘narrated time’ in which the aporetics of temporality and the poetics of narrativity fully coincide. For Ricoeur, Augustine has not only the first but the last word.

At least three specific concerns describe this recalcitrant remnant. A first concerns the question of the relationship of objectivity and justice. Here the worry seems to be that, just as the experiences of atrocity that so mark the 20th century must compromise any quasi-Hegelian confidence about historical progress, so we should ask whether the call to rational interrogation of
tradition in the public square—a central feature of 'narrated time'—is in fact sufficient to it assignment. A second limns the nature of the project's argument: does it provide a solution to the relation of time and narrative? Or is it something different, a mode or a way forward? A third concern seems in part to turn the tables on the second, asking whether, despite his abjuration of Hegelian synthesis, the project in fact has a totalising dimension in favour of poetics. Here, to paraphrase the rock band The Who, it is a question of whether the new boss is really all that different from the old boss; sameness is the ultimate end of hegemony, irrespective of the means.

It is important to be clear about the significance of this moment. At stake is Ricoeur's putative response to two kinds of objections to the project of *Time and Narrative*. Not incidentally, each objection brings us back to the question of the relationship of Augustine and Aristotle in Ricoeur's project. Each matters to the construal of what is at stake for Ricoeur, so each merits rehearsal. The first concerns the relationship of narrative and ethics; the second, the relationship of narrative and the history of theology.

The first objection holds that if we understand narrative to be a structure by which disparate phenomena are held together and made sense of, then the project of narrative is a project of intelligibility. Borrowing from Aristotle, we might say that there can be connections if there is an appearance of design. On this account, causal relations bespeak 'seeing as': narratives highlight salient phenomena. Put differently, the phenomena do not determine what gets into the narrative; rather the narrator does. Meaning and coherence ensure that our experience of the world is not merely 'one thing after another' but, crucially, 'one thing because of another'. There are, to be sure, challenges to this model—on certain construals of the problem of theodicy, for example, and questions about why certain narratives get told and others do not—but it affords a coherent, eminently practical and empirical description of how narrative functions. It is also one natural way to read Ricoeur as Aristotelian.

The second formulation challenges the clarity of Ricoeur's account of Augustine, specifically on the definition of time and temporality. Here the argument is that Ricoeur misconstrues Augustine, specifically on the relation of psychology to cosmology. At question is not Augustine's initial argument that time refers not to the movement of the natural world but to the mind itself. It does indeed seem that the mind measures change in the mind, and this is the source of the *distensio*. Ricoeur's error is to oppose the subjective and objective experiences of time. Here we need to recall that Augustine's innovation is not the discovery of the *distensio*, but his link of *distensio* with the mind (*distensio animi*). This underscores the crux of Augustine's problem, which is the juxtaposition of the unity of God with the plurality of humanity. What *Confessions* narrates is thus a movement from *distentio to intentio*: from the time of man as a sinner, to the time of man engaged in the unity of knowing God as
such. So the *distentio* is subverted by the *intentio*, and the mind has an experience of recovered unity. This is roughly characterized by the difference between Books 1–9 and Books 10–13 of *Confessions*. Thus Augustine’s story describes a movement from philosophy to theology; and Ricoeur, by failing to be sufficiently attentive to this move, does not elicit the true dialogical partner of *distentio*, namely *intentio*.

What is striking about these objections is that they present inverted images of each other. The objection from the vantage of what I am calling narrative ethics privileges an Aristotelian view in which Ricoeur does not fully appreciate the degree to which narrative imposes order on ontology. The objection from the vantage of what I am calling the view of historical theology privileges a reading of Augustine in which Ricoeur does not fully appreciate Augustine’s place in the theological revision of classic philosophies of time. At stake, then, is precisely what Ricoeur takes to be the relationship of time and narrative, or, to use his gloss on his title, of aporetics and poetics. While there is ample material in these objections for extensive discussion, my contribution will be to use this context to at least gesture towards the full import of Ricoeur’s double ending to *Time and Narrative*.

We might begin by identifying what emerges here as the double hermeneutical key to *Time and Narrative*: the iterations of threefold mimesis, and the iterations of the Augustine/Aristotle dialectic. Ricoeur’s continual recourse to triadic formulations throughout the text is his tribute to what he understands to have been established and encapsulated in the threefold mimesis of Part I: the distended experience and structured representation of time. Crucially, all the words in that last phrase merit emphasis: the parallel contrast of ‘distended experience’ and ‘structured representation’, and their mutual reference to ‘of time’. The triadic understandings of fiction and history, and subsequently of traditionality/traditions/tradition, do not merely mimic the threefold mimesis: they elaborate it. This is precisely what Ricoeur intends to signal by a healthy hermeneutical circle: formulation and subsequent reformulation refine, clarify, and elaborate; they do not, however, afford phenomenological closure. The exasperations of Ricoeur’s elaborations testify to this conviction and the concomitant commitment.

In the most crucial sense, then, to understand *Time and Narrative* requires the recognition that the plausibility structurations of narrative do not elide the ontological facts. Similarly, no emphasis on human *intentio* can, for Ricoeur, decisively alleviate the experience of *distentio*. The integrity and the authenticity of Ricoeur’s argument—in all its patient elaboration—hinges on just this point. Whether the source is narrative plausibility or the mind’s union with God, the *distentio* remains, in Ricoeur’s judgment, fundamental to our experience of the world. And so he concludes, not with a pseudo-Aristotelian public square, but with Augustine-like retractions.
None of this is to suggest that the project of *Time and Narrative* is seamless or beyond reproach. My point is simply to insist upon the rigour of Ricœur’s thought regarding the *distensio*. It is in this context that Ricœur’s ultimate imperative—‘to think more and to speak differently’—takes on its full resonance. Here the *distensio* and the aporetics of temporality really can ‘meet’ the poetics of narrative. If the point is to interpret the world, it is surely because to do so is precisely to change it.

REFERENCES


5. Ibid., p. 19. Ricoeur suggestively highlights in this the quality of ‘relegation’ to characterise the phenomena of passing through, and with it the experience of alternate activity and passivity.

6. Ibid., p. 20.

7. While Ricoeur does not say so, it is striking to consider this formulation with reference to Augustine’s citations of the Psalms throughout *Confessions*.


9. My discussion here does not acknowledge Ricoeur’s important cautionary consideration of Hegel (‘Should We Renounce Hegel’, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 3* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 193–209). The worry concerns the degree to which the formulated convergence of history and fiction in ‘narrated time’ is not merely a gesture, but in fact an instantiation, of Hegel’s argument for the oneness of time. Ricoeur argues that we think ‘after Hegel’ citing both the phenomenal aporetics of time and the horrors of the 20th century. I would note that it would be difficult to find a more thoroughgoing antonym to the Hegelian Geist than the Augustinian *distensio* as formulated by Ricoeur.

