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## Translation as Mimesis: Paul Ricoeur's Narrative Account

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### Abstract

Narrating is a human instinct—by narrations, the past exposes itself to us, enabling a communication that would not have been possible in the temporal and geographical distancing, as well as generating an “I” that understand the others as a part of oneself and oneself as an extension of others. From this perspective, translation is, to some extent, narrating, but of more cultural significance. This essay serves as an inquiry into the border between narrative and translation, expounding the primary form “mimesis” by which human experience is made meaningful and which gives the shape and meanings to human life. Mimesis crystallizes the link between translation and historical truth, linguistic hospitality and cultural co-existence and this essay explores the link from the vantage points of Paul Ricoeur's narrative theorizing on the importance of narrative as the expression of experience, mode of communication, and path to understanding the world and ultimately ourselves. Presenting a variety of perspectives from narratology and translation studies, the essay hopes to discourse the intricacies of narratives and translation process, highlights how translation imitates the original writings, events and forms of lives and represent them into new narratives.

**Key words:** Mimesis; Paul Ricoeur; Hermeneutics; Narrative; Translation

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### 1. PAUL RICOEUR AND HIS NARRATIVE THEORIZING

When Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) died in his sleep in his flat just outside Paris, at the age of 92, people lament the last survivor of the “mighty generation” of French philosophers, including Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), who were all born before the WWI. Among one of the “most challenging, hospitable and enduring thinkers of the twentieth century” (Kearney, 2006:x), Ricoeur published over 30 works in his lifetime covering not only all the prevailing philosophical theories from existentialism and phenomenology but also subjects one could hardly associate with his research domain, such as psychoanalysis, politics and even religion, which, according to many, had undermined his academic reputation (Andrew, 2000, p.45)<sup>1</sup>.

Nevertheless, the translation of his major volumes makes the pendulum swing the other way: his work are succinctly published and reprinted in the UK and US, his philosophical detour from Aristotle (384 BC-322 BC) to Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) starts to be appreciated and words become constantly quoted for disentangling public controversies and awakening social consciousness (Buchanan, 1967; Kohak, 1991; Pellauer,

<sup>1</sup> For his steady interest in religion, Ricoeur endures lifetime contempt from his prestigious peers who cautiously keep religion out of their concerns. Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan refuse to take him seriously or to engage in any dialogue he invites. Their massive influence in the continent turns students away from Ricoeur's work in total. Some commentators even mock Ricoeur for being a “throwback philosopher” born in the wrong age and one who “addressing an audience of graying parishioners”.

2000; & Pellauer, 2007)<sup>2</sup>. Interestingly yet ironically, in a striking similar way, Ricoeur's modesty and doggedness, like the long-route he takes in philosophy, have to take a long suffering path<sup>3</sup> before they could be acknowledged in his own nation where "ostentation and flair are often prized" (Macel, Ricoeur, Jolin et al., 1973, p.4).

No philosopher needs justify an interest for either time or narrative, with the former measures human existence and later increasingly unequivocal to be the covert structure we capture the relationship with the world (Fludernik, 1988, p.3). But for Ricoeur, this interest becomes an abiding enchantment. Chasing a shadowy instinct on "semantic innovation" surfaced when he was conceiving *The Rule of Metaphor*<sup>4</sup>, Ricoeur eventually spent almost four years on this three-volume magnum opus in which he intensively yet not exclusively schemas his conception on narrative, starting from the confrontation he stages between time and narrative, to narrative in literature and finally to narrative identity. As if he were not well-expressed, one year later he rippled the narrative scholarship again with his *Oneself as Another*, steering his reflective philosophy further into recess of narrative and understanding.

It would be inappropriate if we would not consult Gerard Genette given his now classic *Narrative Discourse*, in which three different kinds of narrative are distinguished: first and foremost—"recit", which is now generally translated as "narrative", and defined as "the oral or written discourse that undertakes to tell of an event or a series of events." (Genette, 1980, p.26) Generally according with the Russian formalists' distinction of "plots" or "sjuzet", the definition loosely follows Aristotle's definition of plot as "an imitation of actions"; secondly, "histoire", or "story," which is defined as the "succession of events", which accords with the formalists' "fibula", and implies that events themselves, rather than the way they are told, comprise the story and are a kind

<sup>2</sup> Among the most referred books dealing with social injustice are *The symbol of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan, New York: Harper and Row, 1967; *Freedom and Nature: the Voluntary and the Involuntary*, trans. Erazim Kohak, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991; *The Just*, trans. David Pellauer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000 and *Reflection on Just*, Trans. David Pellauer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, to name only a few.

<sup>3</sup> Compared with Heidegger's "Dasein", which "cuts the short" on the ontological quest by making "Being" accessible to all human existence and suggests its indelibility lies within its own possibilities. Ricoeur, on the contrary, painstakingly and also quite proudly undertakes a "long-route" in tracking the meaning of "Being". He holds that "Being" could only be understood through mediation and the meaning of "Being" is continuously subject to interpretations.

<sup>4</sup> Ricoeur's initiation on creating *Time and Narrative* is no more than to form a complementary pair with his work on metaphor, since both metaphor and narrative is "productive invention". Nevertheless, the results transcend what is designed to be and *Time and Narrative* became not only a parallel work to *The Rule of Metaphor*, but also an independent hermeneutic expedition that inspires and entrenches *Oneself as Another*.

of content of the narrative. Then, Genette introduces a third term, "narration", (translated as "narrating"), which he defines as "the act of narrating taken in itself" (ibid, 1980, p.26). Among the three-layered taxonomy, "recit" is the signifier of the narrative text; the "histoire" then aligns with the signified of the narrative, and "narrating" produces narrative action and, by extension, the whole of the real or fictional situation in which that action takes place" (ibid, 1980, p.27).

Corresponding to Genette, Ricoeur also defines "narrative" or "plot" as an imitation of events (Bialostosky, 1982, 21-30)<sup>5</sup>. However, Ricoeur demonstrates little intention, if any, on dissecting and classifying narratives: for Ricoeur, to narrate indeed involves the fields of language and action—telling and stories—yet the significances of narrative lie in his reconceptualization of narratives as "the recounting human experiences" (Ricoeur, 1984, p.6). He thus attributes epistemological and ontological values to narrative, arguing that a human experience is "already riddled with stories in a way that suggests a demand for narrative immanent to experience itself" (Ricoeur, 1984, p.x) (which is found echoing with psychoanalysts who claim that we might think of lives in terms of untold or virtual stories). Therefore, narratives for Ricoeur purport first and foremost, recounting or articulating a life, rather than imposing them on an alien content. Henceforth, we would attempt to diverge from Genette's limited focus on the concept of plot and extend our definition, as Ricoeur did, to encompass both categories of "recit" and narration.

## 2. RICOEUR'S HERMENEUTICAL INTERPRETATION OF "MIMESIS"

Ricoeur's exposition on narratives, drawing upon his earlier work on metaphor and myth, is too complex for a brief recapitulation here. His crucial point, however, is narrative's rule as linguistically mediated temporal synthesis. His elaboration on narrative—consisting mainly of the three-volume *Time and Narrative*, is well-marked with hermeneutic orientation. Ricoeur admits frankly that: "Whether it be a question of metaphor or plot, to explain more is to understand better" (Ricoeur, 1984, p.17). That explains the reason why in *Time and Narrative*, Volume I, Ricoeur starts with the perplexity of the pervasiveness of time: indeed, we have to concede that "time" does not only matter on the intuition level since all experiences are in time, but also on the fact that time constitutes one of the central problems of philosophy and profoundly influences how we think of identity, meaning, existence and self.

<sup>5</sup> Don Bialostosky (1953-), from a Bakhtinian perspective, criticizes Genette and Ricoeur for following Aristotle's definition but ignoring the question of imitation of speech or voice, as in lyric. Bialostosky therefore pits Plato's mimesis against Aristotle's and finds it superior, since it encompasses the world of speech.

Henceforth what Ricoeur determines to undertake, is explaining self, identity, meaning and existence through the lubrication of narratives. That's why the first volume of the book does not only serve as a philosophical retrospection of time, in spite of Ricoeur's determination in taking up the challenge of singling out the persistently difficulty of phenomenological and cosmological time<sup>6</sup>. Ricoeur's ambition is far beyond that: after his patient unknotting of the "aporia of time" and the lengthy analysis on how compatible Aristotle's "mimesis" is to human action, Ricoeur saves his hermeneutic tradition at his ending point, stating that "time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative"(Ricoeur, 1984, p.3).

If, we are allowed to run along Ricoeur's rationale, we may find that "to interpret" never fades from Ricoeur's view, as he says "...the world unfolded by every narrative work is always a temporal world and narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience" (Ricoeur, 1984, p.5). Thus, time is the antecedent to narrative, not merely because any narrative discourse demands temporal engagement, but the nature of narrative requires events be arranged in some way and the establishment of causal relationships. We may have every reason to conclude that, for Ricoeur, to understand time we have to understand narrative since it is the "guardian of time", and the appreciation of our lives, our own selves and our own places in the world could only be obtained by interpreting lives "as if they were narratives", or more precisely, through the work of interpreting our lives we "turn them into narratives, and life understood as narrative constitutes self-understanding" (Simms, 2003, p.81).

Therefore, a hermeneutic circle of time and narrative is forged since the temporal experience is indicated through narratives, while social reality reflected in narratives for they are the tracks of temporal experience. And this circularity is mediated by three senses of representation: mimesis<sub>1</sub>, mimesis<sub>2</sub>, mimesis<sub>3</sub>. (Simms, 2003, p.81)

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### 3. TRANSLATION AS MIMESIS

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Mimesis<sub>1</sub>, or prefiguration, as Ricoeur puts it, describes the basic pre-understanding of temporality which is an antecedent to imitation and representing human action. It configures our pre-understanding on linguistic structure

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<sup>6</sup> Aristotle's understanding of time indicates that time is "the number of movement with respect of the "before" and "after". For him time is a cosmological existence that could not be stretched or tempered by human. However, Augustine's perplexity about time is more reflective, which implies that time is "distention of the soul". The dispute was never settled, if not heated by Kant's neglecting of phenomenological experience, Husserl's inefficiency in reconstituting object time and Heidegger's short-sightedness on the fact that even his "world time" may have to submit to each individual "Dasein".

(how to use words and arrange them in an acceptable sequence), symbolic characters (the context in which we describe, recount human actions) and temporality of action (the pre-narrative structure of temporal experience makes narrative markers of the passing time) and thus presents the cognitive and practical backdrop of mimesis<sub>2</sub>. Then mimesis<sub>2</sub>, or configuration, articulates the pre-understanding structures, symbols into stories by picking up and integrating events into an intelligent whole. Finally, mimesis<sub>3</sub>, or refiguration, refers to how the act of reading changes our post-understanding of the world. Through the three-fold mimesis, Ricoeur establishes his hermeneutic circle and invites us to see it as a spiral: each time us narrative, we are turning the circle through prefiguration, configuration and refiguration and thereby the hermeneutical task of reaching human understanding attains ever greater height.

#### 3.1 Translation Representing the "Prenarrative" Discourse —Mimesis<sub>1</sub>

If we may expend our reading a little further to Ricoeur's juvenilia work, we could find that, for him, language exists primarily because there is first "something to say"; because we have an experience to bring into language—as he put it: "if language were not fundamentally referential, would or could it be meaningful?" (Ricoeur, 1979, p.19) If so, then conversely, once language become utterance, or writing, it would definitely be narrative and once be purged of every figurative and decorative element, language would return to its original vocation—the vocation, according to Ricoeur, to "convey the knowledge of events" (Ricoeur, 1979, p.20).

Hence the pre-narrative feature of language is too clear to be overlooked, and as a direct inference, language is no longer directed towards ideal meanings, as it has been sought by translators of generations, but refers to the experience that pillared by narrative discourses. Therefore we may come to two conclusions: firstly, suppose the "original vocation" of language is per se to "convey events", then the "meaning" in language would accordingly lies not in symbols, but in "events"; secondly, if so, to speak is already to "narrate" and any text may therefore be written narrative discourses. These two inferences are of great significance since the former might shift the prevailing concern over meaning rendering in translation studies and later spontaneously draws narrative to translation studies given the fact that to translate/interpret is to re-narrate the narratives. Subsequently, translation has been firmly planted in the narrative soil and grants the mimesis hypothesis spacious room to flourish. All of these suggest the feasibility as well as the potential productivity of inletting narrative theories into translation studies: not merely for the revivification of translation studies, neither the vindication for narrative theories' interdisciplinary competence, but for the revelation of how translation is intrinsically yet implicitly

related to narrative. Fortunately, Ricoeur's hypothesis is at hand to heal *aporia* and the solution hinges upon Ricoeur's central assumption—*mimesis*.

### 3.2 Translation as Configuration of Narratives—*Mimesis*<sub>2</sub>

From the probe of the pre-narrative outline to the configuration of events and plots, we may have to experience two steps: "eventalization" and "employment", which would receive thorough expounding respectively. "Eventualization"—the precipitation of events in narratives. Supposing, as Ricoeur put it, the original vocation of language is to "convey the knowledge of events" (Ricoeur, 1984, p.12), and translators do manage to perceive the beckons of agents, motives and circumstances, how could we transmit these inkling outlines into intelligible event? "Eventalization" means the rediscovery of the "connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays of forces, strategies that implied in the pre-narrative text"; in this sense, it means to provide elements that may make visible a singularity out of numerous possibilities (ibid, 1984, p.17). It focuses on preserving characters and actions and surfaces the meaning through conjuring pre-existent events, which makes it differentiate from neither Michel Foucault (1926-1984) or *Annales* school of French historians, since the former coins the term to show that history is only a random selection and things weren't necessary as all that and the later refers it to a new meaning creation process, which tends to be something as highly resolved as the rise or fall of grain prices, rather than the colorful narrative drama with which we are familiar.

The notion of "eventalization" itself contains a number of elements. First, it indicates that translation should treat all objects of knowledge as potential events containing characters, actions and motives; Second, it works by constructing around the singular event analyzed as process a "polygon" or rather a "polyhedron" of intelligibility. And one has to bear in mind that the further one decomposes the processes under analysis, the more one is enabled, and indeed obliged to construct their external relations of intelligibility (Foucault, 1987, p.104); Third, the "eventualization" process does not conjure meanings; it only presents events that wait to be integrated into "plots".

For Ricoeur, it is "plot" that "unifies the elements of a story including the reasons, motives, and actions of characters with events, accidents, and circumstances together into a coherent unity" (Ricoeur, 1984, p.9). It "synthesizes, integrates and schematizes actions, events and ultimately, time into a unified whole that says something new and different than the sum of its parts." (Kaplan, 2003, p.50) Ricoeur's focus on plot may stem from its organizational function: in a story, the prime organizer of event is the plot. The plot gives completeness and wholeness to action by providing a measure of explanation. Events are arranged in such a fashion (a

beginning, middle and an end) as to explain the import of those events. The plot provides coherence. Ricoeur observes that the organizational effect of the plot pertains to the discussion of time as discordant. The plot addresses the discordance of time through the arrangement of action into a manageable and meaningful whole.

Comparably, in translation, facing strings of events, accidents and motives, we need to synthesize, integrate and schematize actions, events and ultimately, time into a "unified whole that says something new and different than the sum of its parts" (Kaplan, 2003, p.50), to achieve intelligibility out of heterogeneous, to integrate multiple events into unified human experience. And their strategy we need is what Ricoeur calls "employment", which is broadly defined as a "synthesis of heterogeneous elements" (Ricoeur, 1984, p.33), and which makes completeness out of multiple incidents.

We should bear in mind that, when assume translation as configuration of narratives, we have little inclination to indicate that translation would faithfully represent every piece of events contained in languages; in fact, neither translation could and would not function as a mimic window pane nor *mimesis* would be confined to such a stagnant interpretation: Ricoeur sees *mimesis* a "creative process of selection, translation, and transformation from one media to another" (Ricoeur, 1984, p.33) and by saying "translation as *mimesis*", we intend to arrive at something more than serial or successive enumeration, but a creative, individual representation. Therefore translation gains now approaches that differentiating itself fundamentally from the previous attempts.

### 3.3 Reading Translated Work as Narrative—*Mimesis*<sub>3</sub>

Despite Ricoeur's contribution to the understanding of the *mimesis*<sup>1</sup> and *mimesis*<sup>2</sup>, the picture is still incomplete. The sequence provided by employment is certainly an important part of an effective narrative, yet it is questionable whether the experience of narration could be adequately captured by attending primarily to a story's plot. The consonance of narration is more than its sequence. When we read or hear a story, the linear order of the plot's beginning, middle and end is not the only thing we experience. Indeed more often than not it is not simply the "employment" of a story which captures and holds our attention. We experience not only the tale, the telling, but understanding as well. The essence of narrative, in this sense, is that it is understood; that is to say, the audience is called upon to imagine, in their own mind as if they are narrating to themselves, by a kind of projection, a definite person or personality experiencing the twist and turns of the plot.

And the *mimesis*<sub>3</sub> serves exactly the purpose: it is defined, according to Ricoeur, as the act of reading that links the world of the work with the world of the reader. It completes the passage from prefiguration to configuration

through refiguration. The prenarrative features of language, imitated in narrative through translation, is then unfolded in the act of reading, itself an action that imitates a narrative. As reading completes the hermeneutic circle of prefiguration, configuration and refiguration, translation is also fulfilled with the reception with understanding as its ideal result. The act of reading performs the critical function of bridging the world of the text with the world of the reading and thus inaugurates the reconfiguration of life by translation.

In that case, to produce “good translation” would be nothing less than to tell a “good story”, which does more than just offer a configuration of time. Assuming translating is somehow paralleling to storytelling, and then consequently, it would be fully capable of awakening our affectivity and the values feelings intend that a reconfiguration of the self is effected, like a story.

Clearly this could be done in a variety of ways. Some translators would have the reader attend to the immediacy of experience, and others would have the reader enter the mind of them narrator. Regardless of the literary style, a good story facilitates an entry into the world of the text by evoking an effective response. We are moved by the text to consider the truth of the text. That movement could liberate our affectivity. When we fully experience our affectivity, the groundwork for achieving the values which some feelings intend is laid. At the level, a dynamic circularity between life, translation and narrative has been forged and translation hence obtains the power of clarifying and transforming life.

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## CONCLUSIONS

As well-illustrated in “textbooks” and “handbooks” of translation, “rendering meaning from one language into the other”, often, though by no means always, has been one of the central concerns for translation studies (Bassnett, 1988, pp.5, 13, 15-17; Mona, 1992, pp.3, 7-8, & 23-25; Nida, 1983, pp.77-79; Nida & Taber, 1989, pp.120-126; Gentzler, 2001, pp.11-14, 19, 22-26, 29, 64, 83, 121, 153, 161, 165, 174, 179, & 201.), disregarding it takes the form of “equivalence” or “faithfulness”, be deemed as “art” or “science” or which side translators pick between a “creative artist” who “ensure the survival of writing across time and space” (Bassett, 1988, p.5) and a “manipulative rewriter” who engages in an inequality of power relations. Indeed, translation, in particular cross-cultural translation, primarily involves, and in any cases rightfully to be so, meaning rendering. Nevertheless mono-maniacally cornering translation—as Randolph puts—“one of the most difficult tasks that a writer can take upon” (Quirk, 1974, p.ii) - to the narrow, one-way alley of “meaning transferring” is unmistakably zooming out the boundless indefinite possibility of translation and its unfathomable capability, which inevitably ties up translation and pins it down to “convey the message” or “explain the meaning”.

If so, the nature of translation would miserably be no more than a pure laboring maneuver—porting messages back and forth between “interested parties”, and translation would thus become a dilettante pursuit accessible to anyone with adequate lexical knowledge of other language (s).

Certainly, retrieving “meaning” from geographical and temporal remoteness in every way deserves translators’ attention, and in some cases, it might well determine the fulfillment of task; while when preoccupied by restoring “meanings”, we would narrow-mindedly spare no efforts to please either of the “two masters” or stuck in between and overlook the fact that translation is fundamentally a task undertook by human beings and serving all human kind. Therefore, the “meaning of translation” is far beyond “translating meanings”, or interpreting ideas, but to create a “sanctuary”, which unlike “museums” exhibiting extinct stuffed creatures and art work suffocating behind bullet-proof shields, which bears no similarity with a “library” which people may pay regular visit but could never comfortably live in, and communication is “effectively” lessened by the public sign “Keep Quiet” lurking around every aisle.

To create the “sanctuary”, translators need to embark on an intellectual adventure that prefigures the linguistic and ideological and cultural legacies within the language itself, configures clamor of voices through temporality and finally refrigerate them into mental pictures imprinted in the readers’ mind. It refers primordially and primarily to the unveiling (or restoration) of “events” and then integrate them into “plots” or “stories”, historical and fictional alike, which preserve meaning as if meanings are attached to them and in which agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances, unexpected results would be integrated into a intelligible completeness. If so, the skyline of translation studies would be changed for once and for well: Firstly, the acute tension over meaning (literal or liberal, translatability or untranslatability) could be successfully eased by altering the “meaning rendering” to “event recounting”, or to put it in a simple way, “stories telling” and thus implies infinite possibilities of amalgamation between translation studies and narrative theories. And only by so doing, to interpret, would veritable purport to render what is alien, foreign, or distant in terms of our historically inherited pre-understanding (Kaplan, 2003)<sup>7</sup>, not through racking our brain to pin down equivalences of any kinds or differentiating “false friends”, but via taking translation as a process of recounting historical or fictional events that once happened or were fabricated in cultural distance; and only by so doing, translation could be once again obtain its dynamics by evolving back to its original orbit and becomes stories that told of people, by people,

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<sup>7</sup> It concurs with Ricoeur’s hermeneutic view point. For Ricoeur, to interpret literally means to render the alien, the foreign.

for people. These “recounted” stories would no longer point to a destined ending, target a designated audience; instead, they would beckon cultures of all origins, and be submitted to various individual interpretations.

If we are allowed to take translation as a prefiguration-configuration-refiguration process, forming a hermeneutic circle unifies authors, translators and readers. Translation imitates the prenarrative reality of language, ensuing that the author's proposition of a fictional or historical world is maintained and agents alive; translation imitates the plot by creatively integrate events into stories, unfolding the meanings that subject to individual interpreting; translation imitates the readers' own narratives, ensuring the narratives' continuity in the other dimension. Unlike any trend in translation studies, through “mimesis” translation would for the first time threads authors, translators and readers together, rather than drives them to hostile camps and value them equivocally in the translation decision making process.

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