

The unconscious and its images

Ricœur, Reader of Freud

by Alexandre ABENSOUR

The first volume of Writings and Conferences from Paul Ricœur brings together the texts that he devoted to psychoanalysis. In these articles, Ricœur strives to understand the limits of psychoanalytic discourse, while still emphasizing the depth and complexity of Freud’s work—the comprehension of which presupposes less a linguistic than a semiotic notion of images.

Doctrine and method

This book inaugurates the publications of the “Ricœur Collection” whose mission is to place articles and conferences of Paul Ricœur, the majority of which have never been published in French, in the hands of readers. Why begin with works on psychoanalysis? In his introduction, Jean-Louis Schlegel shows that the discussion between Ricœur and Freud was constant and cannot be limited to the major work of 1965 (*Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*) which is certainly one of the most important philosophical interpretations that has been undertaken of the work of the founder of psychoanalysis. In an excellent postface (“Desire, identity, the other: Psychoanalysis in Paul Ricœur’s works after an *Essay on Freud*”) Vinicio Busacchi clearly explains the scope and steadfastness of the interest that Ricœur had in Freud, that he traces back to his years of Lycée in Rennes where Ricœur had Roland Dalbiez as a professor—the author of the first important philosophical book on Freud (*Psychoanalytical Method and the Doctrine of Freud*, 1936, in two volumes).

Vinicio Busacchi does not add more about this reference to Ricœur's past, though it is not without interest. In his book, Dalbiez introduces a hypothesis that will become a veritable leitmotiv of French philosophy as it struggles with psychoanalysis: the dissociation of "good method," that should allow unconscious mechanisms to see the light of day from an "inappropriate" doctrine, too colored by the scientism of its author. This idea is notably a commonplace in Freudian critiques of the 1930s and 40s: think of Georges Politzer, but also, of course, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty—who get this idea from Dalbiez—but also of the German phenomenological current: Jaspers, Heidegger, Binswanger and others. And yet, Ricœur, through his phenomenological training, accepts the terms of this debate, to which he would contribute an original analysis without limiting himself to the rather stereotypical repetition of the opposition between "good method" and "bad doctrine". This collection of articles covering the years 1962-1988 allows one to comprehend through a particularly lively style, the way in which Ricœur constructs a rich and vivid debate with the work of Freud, in response, of course, to the evolution of his own philosophical interests (the foremost being epistemology and hermeneutics).

Hermeneutics and the dynamic of desire

It is particularly interesting to read these texts today, when the status of Ricœur in the field of French polemics seems to be so incommode. His hermeneutic approach is held as much by the "anti-Freudians" (cf. *The Black Book of Psychoanalysis*, Paris, 2005 and especially some of the least poorly informed articles by Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen and of Jacques Van Rillaer, *passim*) as by the Lacanians as a form of avoidance of the problems of Freudianism. For the former, hermeneutics is a gratuitous philosophical game, blind to the real issues postulated by Freudian epistemology, by the "lies" and "errors" of Freud. For others, Ricœur's interpretive method remains too classical and idealist and does not take into account the linguistic analysis of Lacan, which makes the object of desire an effect of the "signifying chain."

Elisabeth Roudinesco explains, rather well in fact, the disappointment felt by Lacan when *The Essay on Freud* appeared: he expected from Ricœur a philosophical furtherance of his own linguistic approach, but instead the work reproached Lacan for limiting himself to this approach and for not taking account of the richness of Freud's work.¹

And yet, one cannot refrain from being sensitive to the difficulty of enclosing Ricœur in this or that position, "hermeneutic" (a notion that needs to be clearly specified) or other. It is his sensitivity to the complexity of the work of Freud and his capacity to engage it that make it such a pleasure to read his always clear and often profound works. Thus, it is for hermeneutics. Contrary to what is often thought, Ricœur never reduces the Freudian approach to that of an interpretation of the unconscious as text. Here is a remarkable example in the first article about one of the major stumbling blocks of Freudian epistemology, the question of proof: "the pair formed by the investigatory procedure and the method of treatment takes exactly the same place as the operative procedures in the observational sciences which connect the level of theoretical entities to that of observable data. This pair constitutes the specific mediation between theory and fact in psychoanalysis. And this mediation operates in the following manner: by coordinating interpretation and the handling of resistances, analytic praxis calls for a theory in which the psyche will be represented both as a text to be interpreted and as a system of forces to be manipulated."² It is precisely because Ricœur is continuously concerned with the practical dimension of psychoanalysis that he does not reduce it to pure hermeneutics. Of course, as he is part of the phenomenological tradition that we are evoking here (or in the strictly hermeneutic theory of Gadamer or Habermas), Ricœur does not content himself with the energetic language used by Freud to explain metapsychologically the power struggles governing psychic structures. However, a rather remarkable point to be emphasized, is that his critique does not in any way lead one to consider the discourse of power to be absolutely outdated, in the sense that he is conscious of the

1 Elisabeth Roudinesco's formulation in her biography of Lacan seems to go too far: "It is known that the publication of this work put the master (sic) into a furor: Ricœur, indeed, devoted an entire book to Freud and his disciples without taking the least notice of the teachings of Lacan" (cf. Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Lacan*, Paris, 1993, p. 423). There are notably in Ricœur's book, very precise notes on the limits of the use of mathematical symbols in psychoanalysis.

2 "The Question of Proof in Freud's Psychoanalytic Writings" (1977), *Journal of American Psychiatric Association*, Vol 25, p. 848.

impossibility of not using it to take into account what is precisely peculiar of the mechanisms that the practitioner uses: “And this explains why, in turn, the interpretive decoding of symptoms and dreams goes beyond a simply philological hermeneutic, insofar as it is the very meaning of the mechanisms distorting the texts that requires explanation. This is also why the economic metaphors (resistance, repression, compromise, etc.) cannot be replaced by the philological metaphors (text, meaning, interpretation, etc.).”³

The limits of the narrative approach

Of course, one cannot reduce Ricœur’s approach to a capacity to grasp the “two faces” of psychoanalysis. But one can only be struck by his extreme attention to Freud’s text itself and to his desire not to use an overarching philosophical discourse that would soon resolve the apories of the Freudian discourse. Ricœur asks, on the contrary, for psychoanalysis to awaken the philosopher, to make him aware of the “desymbolisation” that man suffers from when delivered to the mechanisms of repression. And, if he sees in psychoanalysis a practice that allows a kind of “resymbolisation”, a recuperation of lost discourse, it is also because he is sensitive to the proximity of Freudian theory and practice with his greater and greater interest over the course of the years in the problem of narration. More than hermeneutics strictly speaking, what Ricœur finds in psychoanalysis is the major question of the narrative construction of the self. The last two articles are dedicated essentially to this problem.⁴

One could resume Ricœur’s interest in this question by this sentence taken from the first article: “*A life is only a biological phenomenon until it is interpreted*” [p. 268 in the French version. Sentence emphasized by Ricœur. This sentence is very close to the formulations of Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*.] We are thus the narrators of our own lives, but Ricœur emphasizes the difference between this story and fiction, strictly defined, life being an open work by its very essence. Ricœur

³ Ibid., p. 851.

⁴ “Life: a story in search of a narrator” (1986) and “The Story: its place in psychoanalysis” (1988).

makes psychoanalysis one of the ways in which the narration of life can be constructed. “The patient who visits the psychoanalyst brings him bits of life’s stories, dreams, “primitive” scenes, contentious events; one can rightly say of analytic sessions that they have the goal, and the effect, for the patient to find a story within these bits that is at the same time more bearable and more intelligible. This narrative interpretation of psychoanalytic theory implies that the tale of a life begins with stories that are untold and suppressed and moves toward effective stories that the subject can take charge of and hold to be constitutive of his personal identity.”⁵ It is not surprising that, at the moment that Ricœur directs his interest increasingly towards this narrative dimension of psychoanalysis, he declares himself particularly dissatisfied with metapsychology. And yet, contrary to the articles of the 1960s and 1970s, Ricœur seems to lose sight of the specificities of psychoanalytic work and, notably, the fact that the development of a narrative of life can also appear as a form of defensive rationalization. On this point, one can vindicate Lacan, who distanced himself from the idealization of this narrative model that formed the center of the “Discourse of Rome” of 1956. [Cf. Jacques Lacan, *Writings “Function and field of speech and language in Psychoanalysis, Paris, 1966, pp. 327*] Lacan was in fact more and more aware of what constituted the “gaps” in the snippets presented by the patient. Or, if one prefers, more aware of the fact that it is the fragments themselves that bring meaning more than a well ordained sequence. For this difficult question, one would have liked for Ricœur to be more faithful to the evolution of psychoanalysis—who today would take on the writings of Freud again in “Constructions in analysis”, where he expresses the wish to obtain “a faithful image of the years forgotten by the patient, an image complete in all its essential parts.”⁶

Psychoanalysis as a general fantasy

One will prefer, in this vein, a remarkable article in finesse and originality, in which, remaining very close to the text of Freud, Ricœur is led to illustrate the limits of the linguistic model (which is also, in a sense, narratological, an approach that he will later defend). In the text entitled “Image and Language in Psychoanalysis”

⁵ Ibid., p. 271.

⁶ S. Freud, “Constructions in Analysis” (1937)

published in English in 1978, he shows to what extent Freud never ceased emphasizing the capacity of the unconscious to express itself in an imaged form (dreams, fantasies, etc.). What could be more banal, one could say. But Ricœur has the merit of pushing the logic to its fruition, through this judicious formula: “My working hypothesis is that the universe of discourse appropriated for psychoanalytic discovery is less a general linguistics than a general fantasy.” Ricœur shows in a convincing way one of the major difficulties of the theory and practice of analysis: if the tool of the treatment is language, the modes of expression of the unconscious are found more at the level of a semiotics of images, for which there is no absolutely adequate language. In a certain way, it is just this semiotics that escapes us for the most part. We cannot do justice in a few lines to the richness of this little text, but one admirable element is to be found in the implicit critique of a rigid opposition that is made in the Lacanian vulgate between the imaginary and the symbolic. Ricœur shows, in a certain way, that each session of psychoanalysis should fight to find the language that can give meaning to a system of images that has its own logic.

If one adds to these approaches a few very perceptive articles on Freudian analysis of culture and of art, in particular, one can only be delighted to thus have access to texts that show to what extent philosophy can show the limits of psychoanalytic discourse (in a way, religion and art can mutually comprehend one another only in terms of a libidinal economy) all the while allowing oneself to be worried by this formidable theory of suspicion that has always remained the work of Freud for Ricœur.

Translated from french by Julie De Rouville.

To find out more :

- The site of the Ricœur Collection : <http://www.xn--xnfondsricur-t5b-ug6i.fr/index.php>
- A. Abensour book review of V. Micheli-Rechtman work “La psychanalyse face à ses détracteurs” (Psychoanalysis confronting its detractors) :
<http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Comment-defendre-la-psychanalyse.html>

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