

Article

Ricoeur and the Power of Symbolic Representation Between Concealment and Revelation

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Abstract

This paper investigates the hypothesis that it is particularly in the field of symbolic interpretation that, in Ricoeur, the intertwining of philosophical reason and religious faith remains strong and proves fruitful without one discourse cancelling out the other. The interest in Ricoeur's hermeneutics of symbols is reinforced by the fact that it seems to be a privileged field for evaluating the productivity of philosophical work in the service of religion and religious work for the benefit of philosophy. Moreover, his research gives shape to a specific philosophy of the symbol and of symbolic creativity, which finds its deepest and most meaningful expression precisely in the field of the hermeneutics of revelation.

Keywords: Ricoeur; hermeneutics; symbolism; representation; revelation; faith

1. Introduction

Ricoeur's extensive research itinerary is characterised by the intertwining of an existential–spiritual journey and philosophical research. His *Intellectual Autobiography* (Ricoeur 1995) documents this, showing the intertwining and mutual enrichment between spiritual journey and intellectual work. Especially in his later years, Ricoeur emphasised the distinction between his being a philosopher and being a Christian, (see Ricoeur 2009, p. 69) that is, the autonomy of philosophical discourse (which is argumentative) in terms of its distance and difference from religious discourse (which appeals to faith). However, it seems that it is precisely the discourse of faith that gives substance and meaning to his journey, particularly in those areas of research that touch on sensitive moral and spiritual issues and are pushed to the limits of what is possible in terms of rational knowledge and explanation. On this front, the position of scholars is not uniform: some highlight the distance between philosophical and religious thought in Ricoeur (Müller 2006; Carter 2014), others the proximity (Brezzi 1999; Mura 2016; Schlegel 2006, etc.), and others the ambivalence of position (Dosse 2001; Greisch 2001; Jervolino 2002, etc.). In this contribution, I investigate the hypothesis that it is particularly in the field of the interpretation of the symbolic that, in Ricoeur, the intertwining of reason and faith remains strong and proves fruitful without the cancellation of one discourse by the other.¹ The interest in Ricoeur's hermeneutics of symbols is reinforced by the fact that it seems to be a privileged terrain for evaluating the productivity of philosophical work in the service of religion and religious work for the benefit of philosophy. There is no doubt that this is also determined by the historical link between philosophical hermeneutics and biblical hermeneutics (a link that mirrors in Ricoeur a dialectic of distancing and rapprochement). But what matters most is the rich dialectic surrounding the understanding of the symbol and symbolic creativity—(1) as an expression of the individual's inner life (G. Marcel, M. Merleau-Ponty, C.G. Jung)



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or (2) as an expression of cognitive possibilities through language (F. de Saussure, E. Cassirer). Ricoeur stands in the middle of these two perspectives through a hermeneutics of representation capable of bringing the question of the symbol (together with the question of metaphor, narration and identity) closer to epistemological and anthropological dilemmas (see Busacchi 2014). Here too, the positions of scholars differ: there are those who argue that symbolic hermeneutics constitutes an initial, then surpassed, stage of Ricoeur's thought (Taylor 1989; Jervolino 2003; Grondin 2015); others emphasise its centrality by recognising the mediating function of symbolism in the understanding of the Self (Taylor 1989; Gilbert 2001; Direk 2025) and/or in human action (Thompson 1981; Kaplan 2003); and others consider specific aspects such as the problem of evil (Kearney 2006), or demythization (Stoker 2004; Valenza and Giacca 2016). I will attempt to demonstrate the centrality, in Ricoeur, of symbolic hermeneutics in its connection with the question of representation.

In order to pursue this dual objective (demonstrating, in Ricoeur, (a) the speculative productivity of religion and religious speculation, and (b) the centrality of the symbolic in its intertwining with the representational), I will follow the path of considering (1) some key aspects of his intellectual biography, (2) key aspects of his methodology and, above all, (3) a critical-theoretical analysis of the key moments of his hermeneutics.

2. Ricoeur's Course Between Philosophy and Faith

Despite the lack of a central focus and systematic character, Ricoeur's philosophy can be framed as research into the human being, an exploration of the depth and complexity of man and humanity. Ricoeur explores the dimension of the "deep" through the lesson of his mentor Marcel on "mystery;" the phenomenological exploration of the "empire of the hidden;" the critical-interpretative examination of Freud's "unconscious;" the hermeneutic exploration of the "symbol," the mythical and the representation; the hermeneutic phenomenology of the self and "otherness;" and more. On the other hand, the dimension of complexity is explored, first of all, through the reflective "long road" of philosophising (between phenomenology, hermeneutics and reflective philosophy; see Ricoeur 1991, p. 12), in accordance with the idea (Nabert) that "reflection is the appropriation of our effort to exist and of our desire to be, through the works which bear witness to that effort and desire" (Ricoeur 1977, p. 46). Secondly, it is explored through a dialogical and interdisciplinary exercise in philosophy (or, also, in philosophising starting from the non-/pre-philosophical, as will be discussed shortly): Ricoeur ranges from historiography to political theory, from semiotics to structuralism, from psychoanalysis to religion, from theology to law, and more.

From the first pages of Ricoeur's *Intellectual Autobiography* (see Ricoeur 1995; see also Ricoeur 1998), the themes of spiritual torment and religious research accompany the young philosopher's intellectual journey. It is a non-linear and difficult journey which proceeds from an initial experience of "absolute dependence" on the religious message (see Ricoeur 1995, p. 5) and in which only with time does philosophy gain an autonomous space. We learn of a "curious and restless" youthful spirit, born through a difficult childhood and adolescence as a precocious orphan, deprived of both mother and father, in a context additionally marked by a condition of great poverty (see Ricoeur 1995, pp. 13–14). Ricoeur's interest in philosophy matured at school, with the lessons of high school teacher Roland Dalbiez, thanks to whom Ricoeur developed an early interest in philosophical disputes and the comparison between knowledge, a self-reflective sensitivity to the dilemmas of existence, and an attention to central dilemmas in philosophy and religion: human nature and its meaning, the limits and possibilities of understanding human depth, and the relationship between reason and faith (see Ricoeur 1995, pp. 14–15). Undoubtedly, it is thanks to Jules Lachelier and Jules Lagneau's lesson that Ricoeur began to thoughtfully consider the crux of the relationship between philosophy and religion—recognising the

value, even the necessity, of a correlation, but at the same time of a distancing, of an autonomy of reason with respect to faith.

In his major philosophical project (*Philosophy of the Will*, 1950–1960) Ricoeur envisioned a philosophical treatment of God—to be realised in the form of a “poetics of the will,” which, however, he never wrote. But in his subsequent research and studies, he increasingly emphasised (unlike his master Marcel) the distinction between being a philosopher and being a Christian (see Ricoeur 2009, p. 69), and the discursive autonomy of the philosophical profession. The most eloquent place in this regard is the Introduction to the book *Oneself as Another* (Ricoeur 1992, p. 24). As mentioned in the introduction, scholars interpret this aspect of Ricoeur’s philosophy differently, often linking it to a sort of defensive commitment by Ricoeur (especially since the 1960s) to deflect accusation of excessive proximity to the religious world and even of crypto-theology.²

Certainly, Ricoeur’s effort to preserve the autonomy of philosophical argument is evident. However, it is equally evident that religious motifs reverberate profoundly throughout his work, often reflected in the rich moral and spiritual implications of his discourse, at other times reflected in references to ultimate and lofty themes (the fault, the evil, the meaning of life, revelation, salvation, etc.) and finally reflected in the direct interrogation of the sacred text, in the reflection that unfolds between the philosophical and the theological. Not only that, his philosophy goes beyond the level of “argumentative” exercise: there is inspiration, commitment and militancy (the latter is particularly accentuated in his youth but is not lacking even in his more mature works).³ In his vision, the non-philosophical or pre-philosophical realm from which his reflective research often begins does not merely constitute the culture substrate of human reality but also touches upon the sphere of social life and existence, political practice and practical values—a disposition towards philosophical engagement that Ricoeur deepens and strengthens by collaboration with Emmanuel Mounier (it is with Mounier that Ricoeur’s philosophy becomes militant in both the religious and political sense; see Ricoeur 1995). Over time, however, the moral vocation also grows stronger, particularly thanks to the lesson of Jean Nabert. In Ricoeur, the reflective philosophy embraced by the latter will unite with the practice of phenomenology and hermeneutics.

Only from the combination of these different aspects, interests, and horizons of action does the truest characterisation of Ricoeur’s philosophising and philosophy emerge: it is a philosophy and a philosophising sensitive both to the dialectic between thought and existence and to the dilemmas of religion and faith (see Greisch 2001). On closer inspection, the justificatory foundation can be found within his philosophical conception.

3. From Non-/Pre-Philosophical to the Philosophical

In his *Intellectual Autobiography*, Ricoeur explicitly states that he has never stopped defending the idea that philosophy dies if its millennia-old dialogue with the sciences is interrupted, whether these are mathematical sciences, natural sciences or human sciences (Ricoeur 1995, p. 39). This connects to the discourse, mentioned briefly earlier, of the non-philosophical beginning of philosophy, so that, according to Ricoeur, it can be (better) said that philosophy dies if it interrupts its millennia-old dialogue with sciences and knowledge. His journey does not lack passages through the great themes of religion and religious texts—even more so for the characterisation of his reflective movement (1) starting from the non-philosophical, (2) between philosophical and non-philosophical, and (3) “at the frontiers of philosophy” (See Brezzi 1969, 1999).

Ricoeur provides the example of a productive mode of philosophical research on topics at the edge of the thinkable—such as the topic of birth—through the initiation of speculative and reflective work starting from the non-philosophical and pre-philosophical,

the symbolic, the mythical, the religious. As Francesca Brezzi notes, Ricoeur argues that philosophy is not a creation *ex nihilo*, but it always has non-philosophical presuppositions. Therefore, philosophical discourse always begins from something outside of itself, from a nebulous but rich matrix, aiming to make explicit and clarify what has been said in an immediate and enigmatic way. This primary material, however, does not simply and immediately pass into speculative discourse but is subjected to critical analysis, to reflection, and this is precisely what constitutes the philosophical act: “philosophy arises in a critical interval after an initial mute vision.” It is therefore a response, through various and further moments, to non-philosophical material, which thus constitutes its source and allows for its autonomy. He accepts the impossibility of philosophical discourse having a radical starting point, as a discourse of pure reason. If philosophy did not have presuppositions, it would be an illusory search in a vain attempt to find a first truth (See Brezzi 1969, pp. 13–14).

The *non-philosophical* plays a decisive role in Ricoeur. Firstly, it presents a living ground for pre-philosophical reflection and questioning of meaning linked to the dilemmas of experience and the “movements” of the inner symbolic world (“listening” to the spiritual, in the mediation of the religious). Secondly, it exists as the bare rock of the factual, that is, of what happens at the level of community, society, and political life, and which tends to direct reflection toward action (philosophising as engagement). Thirdly, it can be seen as the *limes* of the cultural expressed in the symbolic, the mythical, and the religious; fourthly, as a field of other disciplinary knowledge, first and foremost the human sciences; and finally, it can be seen as information—pre-critical and pre-reflective intuitive data. (See Busacchi 2013, pp. 36–63).

4. From Poetics to Hermeneutics of Symbols: The Power of Representation

An expression of this conception and procedural approach to philosophical work can already be found in Ricoeur’s aforementioned youthful project of a philosophy of the will. In its initial idea, this project was intended to be realised through distinct investigations: an eidetic (phenomenological) study of the will, aimed at retracing the pure experience of the subject (Cogito) embodied while abstracting from the dimension of fault and the Transcendent; an empirical study of the will, aimed at exploring the experience of the human being living the fault; and, finally, a poetics of the will, which thematises the relationship of man with the Transcendent. This third investigation held an important and fully justified position, and not only because “the vision of Transcendence and reconciliation is as much a part of man’s being as the experience of the fault, and poetry in the broadest sense is the evocation of that vision.” (Kohák 1966, p. xvi). On the one hand, Ricoeur, explains: The “Voluntary and the Involuntary are constituted by bracketing the fault which profoundly alters man’s intelligibility and by bracketing the Transcendence which hides within it the ultimate origin of subjectivity.” (Ricoeur 1966, p. 3). On the other, he specifies: “the completion of the ontology of the subject demands a new change of method, *moving on to a kind of ‘Poetics’* of the will, suitable to the new realities that need to be discovered. In a basic sense of the word, poetry is the art of conjuring up the world as created. It is in effect the order of creation which description holds in suspension.” (Ricoeur 1966, p. 30)

However, this final research will never be realised. This fact has nothing to do with any rethinking of Ricoeur’s proximity to religious and theological discourse. From the heart of the empirics of the will (especially the second book, entitled *Symbolism of Evil* (Ricoeur 1967), delving into the problem of fault and evil, Ricoeur discovers the depths of the symbolic universe and the hermeneutic path to it. We can say that he owes this discovery precisely to the proximity of his philosophical research to religion and theology (in particular, to Rudolf Buttmann’s lesson; see Greisch 2001, p. 89); it is a proximity that

found its highest and most productive theoretical-speculative expression in the 1960s. Certainly, at the time of the *Symbolism of Evil*, it is the character of a regional symbolism, thematically limited to the problem of evil will, that interests Ricoeur. But soon he comes to recognise the universality of symbolism through the passage through a hermeneutic interpretation of Freud's psychoanalysis (*Freud and Philosophy*, Ricoeur 1977) and through a critical comparison with structuralism (*The Conflict of Interpretations*, Ricoeur 1974).

"Symbol gives rise to thought," Ricoeur states, explaining:

The symbol gives: I do not posit the meaning, the symbol gives it; but what it gives is something for thought, something to think about. First the giving, then the positing; the phrase suggests, therefore, both that everything has already been said in enigma and yet that it is necessary ever to begin again and rebegin everything in the dimension of thought. (Ricoeur 1974, p. 288)

Walter J. Lowe is right in saying that "little imagination is required to link symbol, so understood, to the Marcellian concept of mystery." (Lowe 1986, p. xvi). This new dimension of philosophical research is in fact close to poetics and, like it, represents a specific method, integrated with phenomenological and reflective work: "it proves necessary to confront reason with an object so dense and inexhaustible that we can never pretend to have fully appropriated it." (Ib.)⁴

Ricoeur develops a theory of the emergence of symbolism through what he calls a "criteriology of the symbol" (*crytériologie du symbole*; Ricoeur 1967, p. 10). This criteriology shows how the levels of emergence of symbolism are different and, at the same time, interconnected according to a precise order of derivation (see Greisch 2001, p. 92). First of all, we have *cosmic* symbolism: it is, in fact, primarily on the elements or aspects of the world that man reads the sacred (the sky, the sun, the moon, etc., always mean more than what they are physically). Secondly, we have *oneiric* symbolism: it is in dreams that we can grasp the transition from the cosmic function to the psychic function of humanity's most fundamental and (culturally) stable symbols. This is an important transition because it reflects the concrete possibility of experiencing the sacred at the level of inner life. Finally, we have the symbolism of poetic imagination. To fully understand the character of this last dimension of the symbol, Ricoeur makes a clear distinction between imagination and image conceived as the function of absence (that is, the transcendence of reality through a figurative unreality). This image-representation, modelled on the portrait of the absent, is still too dependent on the thing it represents. In contrast, the poetic image is much closer to the verb than to the portrait (here Ricoeur explicitly adopts Gaston Bachelard's point of view; see Greisch 2001, p. 92). Poetic symbolism shows us expressiveness in its nascent state, places us at the origin of the speaking being, evokes a presence, and speaks to us of the thing itself. Having introduced these three dimensions of the symbol, Ricoeur proceeds to a deeper analysis to better determine the nature of the symbol.⁵ He determines that (1) symbols are signs; they are expressions that communicate a meaning; (2) symbol signs are opaque, because the literal primary meaning already indicates a second meaning (and this opacity constitutes the very depth of the symbol, its inexhaustible character); (3) the symbol "gives" because it is a primary intentionality that analogically gives the second meaning (that is, the symbol is the movement starting from the primary meaning that makes us participate in a latent meaning without us being able to intellectually master the similitude); (4) the symbol is distinguished from allegory because the symbol precedes hermeneutics (even though it conveys a meaning that must be interpreted), whereas allegory is already a particular form of hermeneutics; and (5) the symbol distances itself from the myth; the latter can be understood as the narrative development of the former.

I said that the next step of Ricoeur, after studying the mechanics of evil, concerns Freud's psychoanalysis. It is here that Ricoeur discovers that the movement of inter-

preting the symbol not only expresses the wealth of meanings contained within it but also a “conflict of possible interpretations.” In parallel with the difference between the archaeological movement of interpretation (exemplified by Freud’s psychoanalysis) and the teleological movement of interpretation (exemplified by Hegel’s phenomenology), Ricoeur identifies the conflict between the hermeneutic demystifier and hermeneutic restorer (see Ricoeur 1977, pp. 459–551). Reflecting on psychoanalysis has the philosophical significance of probing the possibilities and the meaning of a dialectic between a hermeneutic approach that demystifies religion and a hermeneutic approach that sees in the symbols of faith a form of address. For Ricoeur, “psychoanalysis is necessarily iconoclastic [...] and [...] this ‘destruction’ of religion can be the counterpart of a faith purified of all idolatry.” (Ricoeur 1977, p. 230).

Beyond this discussion, which I do not intend to delve into here, it is precisely the reinterpretation of Freud’s psychoanalysis that allows Ricoeur to reach a dimension of further deepening in the understanding of symbols. Now it is welded to a more complex idea of *representation*. This is a movement that not only strengthens the value of language, but—by linking the discourse of the symbol to the discourse of the semantics of desire—demonstrates the profound connection between, on the one hand, meaning and representation and, on the other, affectivity and representation. When profound, self-reflection, the interrogation of meaning and the effort to understand mobilise affective feeling, opening the way to the emancipatory, creative and even “inspired” expression of meaning. As Ricoeur explains, “because of their overdetermination symbols realize the concrete identity between the progression of the figures of spirit or mind and the regression to the key signifiers of the unconscious.” (Ricoeur 1977, p. 497). The symbolic function is one and the same with sublimation (“as revealing and distinguishing coincide in it”), which “is not a supplementary procedure that could be accounted for by an economics of desire.” (Ib.) On the basis of this, we can think of a direct and strong implication of symbolism at the level of representation. In fact, as Ricoeur states, “symbols *represent* in a concrete unity what reflection in its antithetic stage is forced to split into opposed interpretations.” (Ib.; the italics is mine).

The theme of representation concerns a key transition in the hermeneutics of psychoanalysis carried out by Ricoeur with reference to Freud’s metapsychology. “Freud’s writings present themselves as a mixed or even ambiguous discourse, which at times states conflicts of force subject to an energetics, at times relations of meaning subject to a hermeneutics.” (Ricoeur 1977, p. 65). Ricoeur critically interprets this dualism only in its initial phase, since the interpretative-argumentative line that he develops eventually comes to characterise it as only an *apparent* contrast. In his view, “there are good grounds for this apparent ambiguity;” he even goes so far as to say that “this mixed discourse is the *raison d’être* of psychoanalysis” (see Ricoeur 1977, p. 65). Thus, the philosopher develops (in the book *Analytic of Freud and Philosophy*) a systematic examination of this sort of “dialectic” between energetism and hermeneutics through Freud’s long journey, documenting how he went through different phases. The metapsychological writing would be situated in an intermediate region, conveying the idea of representation as a point of coincidence between meaning and force (coincidence of the expressive/tendency-to-representation character of Freudian instinct)—a point “where instincts are indicated, are made manifest, are given in a psychical representative, that is, in something psychical that ‘stands for’” (Ricoeur 1977, pp. 134–35) the instincts. This “where,” explains Ricoeur, is the *Repräsentanz*, something psychic that represents instinct as energy.

Freud develops his conception in the metapsychological essay *Das Unbewusste*, where he illustrates how even repressed contents reflect a character of triangulation between drive, affectivity, and representation. A repressed content is a *representation* (*Triebrepräsenz*) or

representative (Triebrepräsident) of the drive. A drive has embarked on the path of psychic expression, “charging itself,” under certain conditions, affectively, and “transmitting” to the dialectic of affect and representation the fate of its possible satisfaction. A key Freudian term here is *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*, literally, a “representative given by a representation” (the English translator says, “ideational representative,” where Ricoeur says *présentation représentative*). For Ricoeur, the metapsychological writings would show how unconscious reality can be reintegrated into the domain of proper meaning through the bond established by drive and representation, so that an instinct (*Trieb*) finds expression through the representation (*Vorstellung*), which finds not only an unconscious placement but also the possibility of being apprehended in its significance. Ricoeur primarily speaks of the reintegration of the unconscious into the sphere of meaning.

Beyond the specific implications related to the interpretation of psychoanalysis, the functioning of therapy, and the hermeneutic “transformation” of traumatic experience, what is of interest here is observing the effects of this interpretation on the understanding of the symbol. The reality of psychic life is reinterpreted by Ricoeur in a way that integrates the dimension of affectivity and meaning into the sphere of the profound, well beyond Freud’s (naturalising) perspective. Ricoeur—who with this vision aligns himself with his youthful idea of the unconscious as “principally affective matter” (Ricoeur 1966, p. 378)—seems to come remarkably close to the idea of psychic life as symbolic life, since the meaning expressed in unconscious productions does not have a purely sign-based or linguistic-representational character, but rather an “affectively charged” representational character. Therefore, every sign or meaningful content originating from the deep psychic world (not just the dream world) “intentionally” addresses a beyond of meaning. And this is to be understood as an intrinsic dynamic of psychic life, beyond cases of specific traumatic experiences.

From this, it follows that the first and deepest dimension of human meaning and expression is the symbolic dimension. And, to the extent that, according to Ricoeur’s criteria of symbolism, the levels of emergence of symbolism are interconnected, the result is that it is none other than the capacity for symbolic representation that serves as a possible mirror of the sacred, at the level of the psyche, of the manifestation of the sacred in the cosmos. Upon closer inspection, Ricoeur had already stated this in *The Symbolism of Evil*: “To manifest the ‘sacred’ in the ‘cosmos’ and to manifest it in the ‘psyche’ are the same thing.” (Ricoeur 1967, p. 12).

But, within this deep connection, how does the third dimension of symbolism, poetic imagination, come into play? According to the interpretation of the profound through the hermeneutics of psychoanalysis, it is the intrinsic dynamics of deep psychic life that confer upon symbolic representation the ability to convey an expressive surplus, laden with both affective value and meaning. The counterpart of this dynamism at the level of conscious life occurs between feeling and imagination, always within the medium of representation. This idea seems to be supportable when considering other places where Ricoeur thematises representation with an explicit connection to Immanuel Kant. The most significant of these is found in an important work devoted to the hermeneutics of revelation: “Herméneutique de l’idée de révélation” (Ricoeur 2010).⁶ This is a work that demonstrates, in Ricoeur, both the fruitfulness of the dialectic between philosophical hermeneutics and biblical hermeneutics, and the centrality and pervasiveness of the symbolic and the exercise of interpretation on a dimension of representation that always stands beyond the plane of immediate rational sense.

According to several interpreters (cf., e.g., Jervolino 2003), Ricoeur alternated between different phases and modes of conceiving and practicing hermeneutics. From an initial phase characterised by the paradigm of symbol, he moved on to a second phase char-

acterised by the paradigm of metaphor and text; subsequently, he moved on to a third phase characterised by the paradigm of narration (and identity); and finally, to a last phase, characterised by the paradigm of translation (and recognition). What we have seen so far however reveals the centrality and persistence of symbolic hermeneutics in Ricoeur's philosophy: (1) as a bridging function of a philosophy that proceeds from the non- and pre-philosophical; (2) as an exercise in delving into the depths of human feeling, where reason enters into dialectic with sentiment, and poetic creativity intertwines with inspiration; and, finally, (3) as a means of expressing the productions of meaning rooted in the depths of psychic life, where affectivity is connected with representation.

All this is confirmed not only in Ricoeur's philosophy of psychoanalysis but also in his own philosophical conception of the human being (understood as *homo capax*). It is in relation to this that the intertwining of philosophical reason and religious faith finds full clarification. This intertwining does not derive from a cultural orientation or from a transdisciplinary conception and practice of hermeneutics, but rather from a precise conception of the human being.

The human being is not only *homo natura*, and his representation and meaningful productions cannot be explained solely in relation to cultural belonging or the dynamism of psychic life as such. His/her research from meaning transcends the material and cultural horizon. For this reason, it is precisely in the field of hermeneutics of Revelation that a renewed philosophy of symbol and symbolic creativity takes shape, revealing its deepest and most meaningful expression.

5. The Burning Bush and the Symbolic: Between Revelation and Concealment

From the very beginning of his study on the question of revelation, Ricoeur highlights its complex nature. It is a "formidable" question (1) because it is the ultimate or primary question of faith and (2) because it is obscured by countless false debates for which the reconquest of a true question constitutes in itself an immense task. With the aim of achieving an "intelligence of faith" (*intelligence de la foi*), Ricoeur battles on the double front of the reconquest of an adequate concept of revelation and a concept of reason (discussed respectively in the first and second parts of the study). The root of the distortion, in fact, lies in the pre-eminence of an "authoritarian and opaque" (*autoritaire et opaque*) concept of revelation as opposed to a concept of reason as "master of itself." (Ricoeur 2010, p. 198).

This opacity is reflected in the traditional discursive amalgamation of the idea of revelation, which sees the intertwining of three levels of language: (1) the confession of faith, (2) ecclesiastical dogma, and (3) the body of doctrines of the magisterium as a rule of orthodoxy. With the latter, the factor of authoritarian distortion enters the picture:

the rule of what must be believed contaminates, in descending order, the other levels that we have not explore in ascending order. The doctrine of a confessional community loses the sense of the historical character of its interpretation and places itself under the tutelage of the rigidified pronouncements of the magisterium. In turn, the confession of faith loses the plasticity and fluidity of living preaching and becomes identified with the dogmatic pronouncements of a tradition and with the theological discourse of a school upon which the magisterium imposes its principal categories [*maîtresses*]. It is from this amalgamation and this contamination that the massive and impenetrable concept of "revealed truth" proceeds.⁷ (Ricoeur 2010, p. 201)

With this, Ricoeur does not aim to deny the inherent quality of dogmatic work—both theological and ecclesial—but rather to restore the notion of revelation to its most original level, to the level of the discourse of faith. It is here that the philosophical commitment

becomes more difficult compared to a comparison between philosophy and theology. This is because, if in the latter, the comparison and exchange already take place at a level equalised by the common discursive participation in the logos, regarding the confession of faith, the philosopher faces something original, something “barbaric,” to use Alfred North Whitehead’s expression (which Ricoeur cites) (see Ricoeur 2010, p. 201). On the one hand, we are in a situation in which the philosopher, free from dogmatic constraints, does not seek to interrogate the religious text but ideally engages in dialogue with “the believer who seeks to understand themselves by better understanding the texts of their faith.” (Ib.) On the other hand, we find ourselves in the situation of a philosophical exercise starting from the non- and pre-philosophical (which, as we have seen, plays such a large role in Ricoeur’s speculative work). With this return to the origins of the discourse of revelation, the philosopher opens up a variety of expressions of faith through a plurality of discourses that reflect the very plurality and polysemy of the concept of revelation: prophetic discourse, narrative discourse, prescriptive discourse, discourse of wisdom, and hymnal discourse (see Ricoeur 2010, pp. 202–25). Ricoeur progressively passes them through a hermeneutic and reflective sifting, drawing progressive enrichment for speculative thought (and, indirectly, for “the believer who seeks to understand himself by better understanding the texts of his faith”).

It is indeed necessary to overcome the prejudice of considering these forms of discourse as simple religious genres whose rhetorical character should be neutralised in order to extract their theological content. The original language of faith does not “live” in the content of a proposition, in the argumentative construct, but in the plurality of forms of narration, prophecy, legislative texts, wisdom sayings, hymns, prayers, etc. But if “it is in the contrasting play between recitation and prophecy, then between history and legislation, then between legislation and wisdom, finally between wisdom and lyricism, that religious ‘saying’ is constituted” (Ricoeur 2010, p. 228), then the idea of revelation must be a concept that presupposes an analogical function. “Analogy proceeds from a term of reference: the prophetic discourse. Here revelation means inspiration from first person to first person. (Ib.) “Inspiration designs [. . .] in a purely analogical way the arrival in language of this perspective force, of this illuminating capacity, of this lyrical *pathos*. It would be over-psychologising revelation to reduce it literally to the notion of writing under dictation. It is the force of things said that moves the writer.” (Ricoeur 2010, p. 229). On the other hand, meaning changes in other genres, for example in the narrative genre, which invites us “to cast on the events narrated the relevant light that comes [. . .] from their constitutive function. The narrator is a prophet to the extent that the events that generate meaning are brought into language. Here a less subjective concept than that of inspiration is outlined.” (Ib.)

This line of reasoning leads Ricoeur to a new and important observation that leads to the heart of his discussion. It introduces a discussion that demonstrates a problematisation comparable to the hermeneutic problematisation constitutive of symbolism (=the giving and hiding of meaning):

If there is one thing that can be said unequivocally about all analogical forms of revelation, it is that in none of its forms does revelation allow itself to be encompassed and dominated by knowledge. In this regard, the idea of *secrecy* is its limiting idea. The idea of revelation is a double-sided idea. The God who reveals himself is a hidden God who belongs to hidden things.

The confession that God is infinitely above human thoughts and words, that he guides us without our understanding his ways, that the enigma of man himself remains obscure until God clarifies it [*communiqué*—this confession belongs to the idea of revelation. What is revealed is also what is reserved. (Ricoeur 2010, p. 230)

Here, the episode narrated in the Book of Exodus of Moses's call and the burning bush (Exodus, 3, 13–15) takes on emblematic value, as does the tradition of the *revelation of the divine name*—a name, however, that is unmentionable. Here, the outcome of Ricoeur's reflection once again emphasises, on the one hand, the complexity and depth of a state of affairs that cannot be rationally penetrated and, on the other, the importance of striving towards an understanding of faith.⁸

It is at this point that the philosophical-hermeneutic exercise is called upon to perform its full positive function after an initial phase of “decisive listening” (i.e., critical of an opaque and authoritarian concept of revelation), starting from the non- and pre-philosophical. However, what is produced is a new form of dialectic between the rational and the non-rational or, even (better), between reason and faith, because

If the unacceptable claim of the idea of revelation is that of a *sacrificum intellectus* and total heteronomy under the verdict of a magisterium of last resort, the opposing claim of philosophy is that of full transparency of the truth and full autonomy of the thinking subject. These two claims tend to make the gap between what are called the “truths of faith” and the “truths of reason” unbridgeable. (Ricoeur 2010, p. 234)

Ricoeur can solve the gap thanks to the oscillating characterisation of his *modus philosophandi*. As we have said, it always combines an effort of intellectual inquiry with an existential and spiritual effort through a *reflection* that, before reflecting the “light of the logos,” reflects “our effort to exist” and “our desire to be.” The illicit claim of revelation can therefore be understood not as a clarifying and decisive hermeneutic, but rather as a “non-binding appeal” (with all that the idea of “appeal” implies). This is a middle way, oscillating between a claim to objective transparency and a claim to subjective autonomy of philosophical discourse. Ricoeur explains:

The first side looks in the direction of the space of manifestation of things, the second looks towards man's understanding of himself when he allows himself to be regulated by manifest and spoken things. These two dimensions of the problem correspond to two major objections that are opposed to the very principle of revealed speech. According to the first, any notion of revelation violates the idea of objective truth, measured by the criterion of empirical verification and falsification. According to the second, any idea of revelation violates the idea of revelation damages the autonomy of the thinking subject inscribed in the idea of a self-aware consciousness. The dual meditation I propose addresses, in turn, the claim to transparency, supported by a concept of truth as adequacy and verification, and the claim to autonomy, supported by the concept of a sovereign consciousness. (Ricoeur 2010, p. 238)

The itinerary of research around the first point finds expression in an analysis of the *revealing* function of *poetic* discourse on the triple bases of autonomy through writing, externalisation through the work, and reference to a world. In fact, the poetic function is not a cognitive function in the sense of the constitution of rational and scientific knowledge, and it conveys a dimension of revelation in a non-religious sense but one that connects with the religious. It “is the suspension of the descriptive function; it does not increase our knowledge of objects.” (Ricoeur 2010, p. 242). For Ricoeur, “only poetic language restores to us a belonging to an order of things that precedes our ability to oppose these things as objects placed before a subject.” (Ricoeur 2010, p. 243). This produces something paradoxical, because it is to the extent that the poetic distances itself from the known and the real that it gives expression to its intrinsic possibility of redescription and “truth.” “Hermeneutical truth,” explains Ricoeur, “no longer means verification, but manifestation,

that is letting what is revealed be. What is revealed is each time a proposition of the world, of a world such that I can inhabit it in order to project onto it one of the possibilities that are most specific to me. It is in this sense of manifestation that language, in its poetic function, is the seat of a revelation." (Ricoeur 2010, p. 245).

We are now faced with a new analogous type of revelation that draws a parallel between poetic text and biblical text, according to a possible dialectic that applies both to the mutual illumination of philosophy and religion and to a mutual appeal to believers who live in the intramundane reality "and seek to understand themselves by better understanding the texts of their creed":

In the same way that the world of poetic texts opens the way to the ruin of the intramundane objects of everyday reality and science, so too does the new being projected by the biblical text open a path through the world of ordinary experience and in spite of any closure of this experience. The power of projection of this world is power of rupture and openness.

Thus, it is the non-religious sense of revelation that frees us [. . .] from psychologising interpretations of the inspiration of the scriptures, in the sense of a whispering of the word into the writer's ear. If the Bible can be said to be revealed, this must be said of the "thing" it says, of the new being that unfolds. (Ricoeur 2010, pp. 246–47)

As for the second point, the claim to autonomy, it is based on the concept of a subject who is master of his own thoughts and who exercises this mastery first and foremost in self-understanding. Ricoeur identifies testimony as a key concept in self-understanding and develops the rest of his analysis around it. To overcome the self-founding claim of consciousness, he first refers to the concepts of "mediated reflection," "belonging or second reflection" and appropriation. His approach opens to the perspective of a "deposing consciousness" (*dessaisissement de la conscience*) that is fully in line not only with Marcel and Jean Nabert's lessons (absorbed by Ricoeur) but also with the intrinsic character of a philosophical hermeneutics that problematises understanding. Secondly, the category of testimony comes into play, introducing the dimension of historical contingency. Inspired by Nabert's lesson (in *Le désir de Dieu*, Nabert 1966), Ricoeur shows how this category regulates the dethronement of consciousness, occupying, "on the 'subjective' side if the hermeneutics of revelation, a strategic position similar to the category of poetics on its 'objective' side." (Ricoeur 2010, p. 257).

Three dialectical movements characterise testimony: (1) event and meaning, (2) process of false testimony and (3) testimony *about* things seen/testimony *of* life. They find resonance in the movement of a reflection that renounces the dominion of consciousness. In this regard, the third dialectic is particularly significant: "The witness of things seen, we say, becomes, at the limit, the martyr of truth. It is here that reflection, if it does not want to abuse words and become radically untruthful, must confess its inequality to the *historical paradigm* in its movement of renunciation." (Ricoeur 2010, p. 265). Well, as Ricoeur points out, consciousness cannot produce this renunciation of its own sovereignty on its own: "it can only do so by confessing its entire dependence on the historical manifestations of the divine." (Ricoeur 2010, p. 266). This is not a complementary movement but a true checkmate of consciousness by religious testimony. And to fully account for this from a philosophical point of view, Ricoeur refers to the description of aesthetic ideas offered by Kant in his *Critique of Judgement*. To account for the aesthetic productions of genius, Kant recalls the power of the imagination to "present" the ideas of reason for which we have no concept. Imagination, for this representation, gives "occasion to think a lot" (*viel zu denken*). In other words, imagination gives thought the power to think more. Ricoeur does not say so explicitly, but this argument refers back to his philosophy of

symbolism and representation. He clearly indicates that the failure of religious testimony on consciousness is not simply due to the “historical” nature of the testimony. It is due to its conveying a message that exceeds rational possibilities, that reveals and conceals, that gives food for thought by challenging hermeneutic reflection. Only through reflective imagination, that is, a reflective-hermeneutic and spiritual effort, can this message be recognised, understood and internalised. In light of this, the symbolic charge released by the experience of the burning bush as such seems to have, in and of itself, greater force, effectiveness and significance than the testimony in its dual characterisation as something seen and as testimony of life.

6. Conclusions

In the reasoning that Ricoeur adopts from Kant, “imagination gives thought the power to think more;” and, in his opinion, “historical testimony has the same structure and the same function.” (Ricoeur 2010, pp. 267–68). But this argument is even more valid for the symbolic dimension, to the extent that we take up the idea of representation as the ground, at the level of interior life, of the dialectic between the dimension of affective–spiritual feeling and the dimension of the expression of meaning.

With this, I do not aim to contradict Ricoeur’s perspective but rather to make explicit an implicit reason: the capacity of his reflective work to oscillate between philosophical and religious discourse results as much (1) from an adherence to a philosophical lineage that links phenomenology, hermeneutics and reflective tradition, as (2) from an intellectual itinerary travelled between faith and reason, and, finally, (3) from a specific conception of the human being that leverages a profound idea of interior life and the search for meaning expressed in rational questioning, reflection and inspiration. A hermeneutics of symbolism practiced between faith and reason not only connects these different modes of expression in unity but also better satisfies the aspirations of the spirit.

Through the analysis developed here, the following aspects of Ricoeur’s thought appear to have been strengthened, compared to the interpretative position currently dominant: (1) a valorisation of the intertwining of philosophical reason and religious faith (in particular, the recognition of the productivity of philosophical work in the service of religion and of work on religion to the benefit of philosophy); (2) a qualification of the symbolic as the fulcrum of representation and of psychic/inner life; and (3) a valorisation of the role of the symbolic as the centre of reflective experience and faith.

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Notes

- ¹ Not all scholars who recognise the profound connection between Ricoeur’s philosophical research and Christian tradition agree with this perspective: for example (1) for John Wall, William Schaweiker and W. David Hall, Ricoeur’s greatest contribution concerns theological ethics, and therefore research concerning moral philosophy (Wall et al. 2002, p. 7); (2) for Loretta Dornisch it is narrative hermeneutics in particular that reveals Ricoeur’s ongoing search for mediation between faith and philosophy (see Dornisch 1990); and (3) for Gaspare Mura, the fulcrum of Ricoeur’s link between philosophy and religion is to be found in his idea and practice of hermeneutics as the search for and clarification of truth (as opposed to an idea of hermeneutics as mere *téchne*; see Mura 1990).
- ² See (Müller 2006, p. 161). Ricoeur’s statements in *Critique and Conviction* (Ricoeur 1998) and *Intellectual Autobiography* (Ricoeur 1995) would also fall within this same defensive strategy: see (D’Angeli 2017).

- ³ Consider, for example, the speech he gave in Prague in the autumn of 2000 at the conference of the Fédération Internationale de l'Action des Chrétiens pour l'Abolition de la Torture; consider his involvement in Amnesty International in the 1990s, his criticism of France's inaction towards the former Yugoslavia, his commitment to the *sans-papiers*, etc.
- ⁴ The author continues: "This is the function performed variously in Ricoeur's philosophy by symbol, myth, metaphor, and narrative: because they speak in a voice other than that of conceptual reflection, such texts may serve as both source and limit." (Lowe 1986, p. xvi)
- ⁵ This topic is further explored in the section of *The Symbolism of Evil* dedicated to symbol criteria: see (Ricoeur 1967, pp. 10–19).
- ⁶ Originally, in Ricoeur, Paul, Emmanuel Levinas et al. 1977. *La Révélation*. Bruxelles: Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis (Publications des Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis, 7), pp. 15–54).
- ⁷ The translation is mine, here and in following quotations.
- ⁸ "The dialectic of the hidden God who reveals himself dissipates in the knowledge of being and providence. To say that the God who reveals himself is the God who hides himself is, on the contrary, to confess that revelation can never constitute a body of truth in which an institution can prevail. At the same time, dispelling the massive opacity of the concept of revelation also means ruining any totalitarian form of authority that would claim to hold the revealed truth" (Ricoeur 2010, p. 233).

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