Traces of War

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SECTION C

Prisoners of War
Give Philosophy Lessons
CHAPTER SIX

Life Stories

Ricœur

The chapters in the previous section discussed how war is a lingering and also problematic reference point in the works of those who lived through it. How it should be understood, represented and emotionally processed remains unresolved. Just as trauma is all the more disturbing when it goes unnamed in a life or text, the Second World War inflects post-war experience and writings when it is not explicitly present. The chapters in this section discuss three men – Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricœur and Louis Althusser – who in many respects were very different from one another. Levinas was Jewish, and is best known for his work in ethics; Ricœur was Christian, and is best known for his work in hermeneutics and narrative theory; and Althusser was a Marxist, and is probably best remembered today for killing his wife. Yet all three have in common that they spent most of the Second World War as prisoners of war. When they returned from captivity they were profoundly changed; and each of them would go on to rank among the key thinkers of their generation. The issue here is: where are the traces of war in their post-war thinking and writing? I begin with the case of Paul Ricœur.

Whose life story is it anyway?

Ricœur was born into a Protestant family in 1913. His father was killed only two years later in the First World War, so war played a defining part in his life from its earliest stages.1 He proved to be a brilliant student and

1 For further details of Ricœur’s biography, see Reagan, Paul Ricœur: His Life and his Work, and Dosse, Paul Ricœur: le sens d’une vie.
was on the verge of an academic career when he was conscripted in 1939, despite his pacifist convictions. He was taken prisoner in 1940 and spent the rest of the war as a POW. After the war he resumed his academic career, establishing himself as one of the most prolific and influential philosophers of the twentieth century. At a time when hermeneutics was out of fashion and largely misunderstood in France, his work in the area made him one of the world’s leading thinkers in the philosophy of interpretation, rivalled only (perhaps) by Heidegger and Gadamer. His astonishingly wide-ranging writings dealt with virtually every area of importance in philosophy; and he also wrote hugely important work on narrative and its role in the construction of the self. This aspect of his work is particularly relevant here, as I want to discuss how it relates to Ricœur’s account of his own time as a prisoner of war.

For Ricœur, as for other important philosophers of narrative, such as Arendt, Cavarero, Kristeva and MacIntyre, telling stories about our lives is one of the most fundamental aspects of the lives about which we tell stories. The three volumes of Ricœur’s monumental *Temps et récit* establish narrative as a means of organizing the chaos of experience into the order of sense. Plot, or emplotment (*la mise en intrigue*), is conceived as a basic human need and reality. Through plots, we reconfigure what Ricœur calls ‘notre expérience temporelle confuse, informe et, à la limite, muette’ (*Temps et récit*, I, p. 13). Experience is confused, ambiguous, maybe even wordless. Through emplotment, we give it form and meaning. For Ricœur, this entails a suspension of the distinction between truth and falsehood because plots do not exist objectively in the natural, observable world; but emplotment also brings with it a restoration of referentiality, because the stories we tell about our lives nevertheless tie them back to the real people we really are. Stories may not be ‘true’ in any simplistic sense; but without them, there is nothing true we can say about ourselves. To put it slightly differently, the stories we tell may create a part of the truth even if they are not uniquely true. This can be linked to what Ricœur calls ‘narrative identity’ (*l’identité narrative*).

Towards the end of the nearly one thousand pages of the three volumes of *Temps et récit*, Ricœur tells us that ‘l’histoire d’une vie ne cesse d’être reforgée par toutes les histoires véridiques ou fictives qu’un sujet raconte sur lui-même. Cette reforgation fait de la vie elle-même un tissu d’histoires racontées’ (III, p. 356). Narrative identity is identity insofar as it is available to us. There is no fixed, eternal, immutable essence of the self either inside or outside language, only an ongoing self-construction through the unstable, changeable autobiographical, autofictional stories
we tell to ourselves and others. Narrative identity is always unfinished, in process and subject to radical dispute and revision. Judith Butler echoes Ricœur’s analysis in her account of her own self-narrations:

I would have to say that I can tell the story of my origin and I can even tell it again and again, in several ways. But the story of my origin I tell is not one for which I am accountable, and it cannot establish my accountability. At least, let’s hope not, since, over wine usually, I tell it in various ways and the accounts are not always consistent with one another. Indeed, it may be that to have an origin means precisely to have several different versions of the origin – I take it that this is part of what Nietzsche meant by the operation of genealogy. Any one of those is a possible narrative, but of no single one can I say with certainty that it alone is true. (Giving an Account of Oneself, pp. 37–38)

In relation to Ricœur, I take this to mean that the plots which inform the narratives of our lives are always largely preinterpreted, because they omit or give form to the contradictory disorder of experience; but while their form pre-inscribes how we should interpret the story, it also allows, at a deep structural level, for the possibility of different narrativizations. Narrative, here, is hermeneutic because it implies meaning but does not impose it, suggesting avenues of interpretation without foreclosing others. In other words, narrative identity is always unfinished, in process and subject to radical revision.²

So what does this mean for Ricœur’s own self-narrative, and in particular his account of his experience of the Second World War? In 1995 Ricœur published, first in English then in the original French, an essay in intellectual autobiography which makes up the largest part of his book Réflexion faite. The essay includes a short account of his wartime experiences. The account begins with a one-sentence summary of the years from 1939 to 1945: ‘Je fus tour à tour civil mobilisé, puis combattant vacant, enfin combattant vaincu et officier prisonnier’ (p. 20). This minimal account of events constitutes a plot of sorts, though as a summary of six years of a person’s life it is surprisingly rapid. The sentence is followed by a paragraph which describes Ricœur’s five years as a prisoner of war. It begins with a brief overview of those five years: ‘La captivité passée dans différents camps de Poméranie fut l’occasion d’une expérience humaine extraordinaire: vie quotidienne, interminablement partagée avec des milliers d’hommes,

² For penetrating analysis of narrative hermeneutics, see Brockmeier and Meretoja, ‘Understanding Narrative Hermeneutics’.
culture d’amitiés intenses, rythme régulier d’un enseignement improvisé, lecture inentravée des livres disponibles dans le camp’ (p. 21). Ricœur goes on to describe how, as a prisoner of war, he studied the works of Karl Jaspers, which would later lead to his first book, jointly written with fellow prisoner Mikel Dufrenne. He also read Heidegger, began work on a translation of Husserl’s *Ideen I* and ran courses which later developed into his *Philosophie de la volonté*. Ricœur refers to this period as his ‘retraite forcée de cinq ans’ (p. 21), echoing words we have already seen in Sartre’s *Carnets de guerre*. At the end of the paragraph, he gives a single-sentence summary of his five years of captivity: ‘Ces années de captivité furent ainsi fort fructueuses tant au point de vue humain qu’intellectuel’ (p. 21). And that’s all he says. The following paragraph refers to his return from captivity, the joyous rediscovery of his family (including a daughter born during the war whom he had never met) and his first years of post-war teaching.

Ricœur’s account of his five years as a prisoner of war surprises both for its brevity and its placidity. There is no obvious trace of trauma here. In fact, in most respects, captivity appears to have been a positive experience. Ricœur emphasizes friendship, teaching and the possibility of uninterrupted study. For an aspiring scholar, the ‘retraite forcée’ of the camp sounds remarkably like an extended sabbatical. It laid the foundation for his future success, with his work on Jaspers, Husserl and the philosophy of will. The paragraph begins by referring to ‘une expérience humaine extraordinaire’ and concludes by describing the years as ‘fort fructueuses’. It all sounds quite pleasant, almost enviable. We might recall Beauvoir’s comment that it was ‘charmant’ (*La Force de l’âge*, p. 674) to escape from Paris and stay with friends in the troubled days of the Liberation.

Those of us trained in the hermeneutics of suspicion might nevertheless already be wondering what may be concealed behind Ricœur’s sanguine account of captivity. Can it really have been so unambiguously enriching? What happened to the experience of cold, hunger, deprivation, brutality, fear of death, loss of freedom and separation from one’s loved ones with which we are familiar from other wartime narratives? Could it really have been such a rich, humanly rewarding and intellectually stimulating period for Ricœur? What aren’t we being told?

The fact that there is, as I have said, no obvious trace of trauma here does not mean that there are no signs of profound disturbance beneath the calm surface of Ricœur’s self-narrative. Indeed, the context in which Ricœur recounts his years as a POW – if not his explicit self-analysis
– places the Second World War in a sequence of terrible losses. Only a few pages earlier, he had referred in parenthesis to the deaths of his parents:

Orphelin de père et de mère (ma mère était morte peu après ma naissance et mon père, professeur d’anglais au lycée de Valence, avait été tué en 1915 au début de la Première Guerre mondiale), j’avais été élevé à Rennes, avec ma sœur un peu plus âgée que moi, par mes grands-parents paternels et par une tante, sœur cadette de onze ans de mon père et restée célibataire. (Réflexion faite, p. 13)

It feels as if too much information is crammed into this sentence, and in particular into the parenthesis: why mention that the aunt remained unmarried, how did the mother die and what were the lasting consequences of being orphaned so early? Like Camus, whose father died in 1914 as a result of wounds suffered in the Battle of the Marne, Ricœur’s life is blighted almost before it had begun by the events of the Great War. Moreover, the parenthesis in which he refers to the deaths of both his parents is suspicious for its brevity: we might wonder whether its almost casual tone serves to mask a deeper sense of personal catastrophe. The context suggests that perhaps also the tragedy of the First World War is reawakened by the events of the Second. Moreover, war becomes the intellectual grid through which Ricœur understands his own development in his early years as a student of philosophy, dealing with the competing demands of rational enquiry and Christian belief: ‘j’appris à mener, d’armistice en armistice, une guerre intestine entre la foi et la raison, comme on disait alors’ (Réflexion faite, p. 15). Forged in the period between two armistices (1918 and 1940), Ricœur’s identity becomes the site of an unfinished, unresolved war.

This sense that the war and its catastrophic losses are not over, that they continue to form the developing intellectual who would become a world famous philosopher, is intensified by a further loss. Ricœur’s father had died for his country in 1915; but Ricœur would subsequently lose faith in the cause for which his father sacrificed his life:

la découverte précoce – vers les onze-douze ans, de l’injustice du Traité de Versailles avait brutalement inversé les sens de la mort de mon père tué sur le front en 1915; privée de l’auréole réparatrice de la juste guerre et de la victoire sans tache, cette mort s’avérait mort pour rien. (Réflexion faite, pp. 18–19)³

³ See also Ricœur’s comments in an interview with Charles Reagan: ‘it was not [my father’s] loss as such which was the shock, but the meaning which it was given
In this account, the father dies – as it were – for a second time: the first death is his literal demise; the second is the perhaps even more traumatic collapse of the moral framework which gave sense to his actual loss. Ricœur becomes a pacifist, and his father dies again. Moreover, further personal disasters are not far off, as Ricœur shows with what is, once again, suspect understatement: ‘Je n’oublie pas non plus que plusieurs deuils – la mort de mes grands-parents qui m’avaient élevé et, plus cruelle encore, celle de ma sœur Alice, emporté par la tuberculose – avaient déposé au préalable la marque du momento morti sur la réussite sociale et le bonheur familial’ (Réflexion faite, pp. 19–20). A few lines later, Ricœur describes how ‘La guerre [le] surprit’ (p. 20). In the context, though, the war hardly comes as a surprise, partly because we as readers know full well it is on the horizon, and partly because it appears in this account as merely another in a series of personal catastrophes presented with casual, perhaps self-protective rapidity.

So one aspect of Ricœur’s self-narration is the hint that events in his personal biography conceal an element of trauma even if it remains unexplored or underexplored. But there is another dimension to what is not said here. Ricœur’s short account of his five years as a prisoner of war was published, as I have said, in English and French in 1995. A couple of years earlier, a philosophy teacher named Robert Lévy had discovered three articles which were attributed to Ricœur but not included in his official bibliography. They had been published in 1941 in a collaborationist journal entitled L’Unité française. There is no suggestion that in these articles Ricœur said anything that could reasonably be construed as pro-fascist or anti-Semitic. Nevertheless, here was evidence that, during the first year or so of his captivity, Ricœur had lectured on behalf of the ‘Cercle Pétain’, which supported Marshal Pétain’s policy of collaboration with the Nazi occupiers. Copies of the articles attributed to Ricœur were sent to him; and in 1994, he submitted a paper to the historian Henry Rousso, in Rousso’s role as president of the Institut d’Histoire du Temps Présent, responding to the articles and explaining his position. Ricœur insisted that he knew nothing about the publication of the articles in L’Unité française before he was made aware of them in the 1990s. Of the three articles, one was taken out of

by my family. That is, that he had died for a just cause and, even though dead, he was a member of the victorious army. It was this conviction that was shattered all at once when I was ten or twelve years old’ (Reagan, Paul Ricœur, p. 126).

4 See Ricœur, ‘Note sur certaines “Paroles de prisonniers”’. 
context from a journal originally published in 1936; in relation to the other two, Ricœur could not say exactly what was genuinely his own work. Of one, he said that he was ‘incapable d’y démêler [sa] propre contribution’. And of the other, although he did not deny some part in it, he insisted categorically that it was published without his knowledge or consent: ‘je déclare ne pouvoir assurer que ce texte n’a été ni coupé, ni surchargé, ni en aucune façon manipulé: de toutes façons, je ne l’ai pas publié’ (emphasis original).

The stress on publié is significant here. Many years after the war, Ricœur could not be sure exactly what he had or had not written; but he was adamant that he had not authorized publication of the material in question. It is as if authorization to publish is as important to authorship as the actual drafting. One only becomes an author, in the sense of a subject responsible for the text which appear under one’s name, at the point where one assents to publication. Ricœur did not deny having been a member of the Cercle Pétain for a period or having lectured in support of its beliefs; but he did not accept responsibility as author of two of the texts in question. He did not recognize what was and was not from his own hand, and he stated that he had neither known nor approved of their publication. In fact, it seems that the articles attributed to Ricœur and other prisoners were published from notes brought back from captivity by a fellow POW who was himself pro-collaborationist; it remains unclear to what extent the articles contained reliable quotations from the attributed authors and to what extent they were deliberately or inadvertently altered. Even so, admitting to his temporary allegiance to Pétainist policies, Ricœur went on to explain why someone from his background, belonging to the socialist, antimilitarist, pacifist left could for a period have supported Pétain. In part, he felt guilty for the possibility that his own beliefs had to some extent contributed to the disastrous French defeat of 1940. He conceded the same point in an interview with Charles Reagan: ‘When I was a prisoner of war in 1940, I felt guilty for this defeat, thinking that my pacifism during the preceding years was, in large part, responsible for the failure of France to sufficiently rearm itself in the face of German rearmament’ (Reagan, Paul Ricœur, p. 127). This sense of guilt underlies his Pétainist period, for which he expressed shame and regret.

It is important to be clear: in my view, Ricœur’s account of this episode is dignified and persuasive. There certainly remain some unresolved questions. His criticism of the failed democracy of the Third Republic began before the Second World War, so it could be – and has been
— suggested that he was pre-inclined to support the Pétainist National Revolution before the defeat of 1940; and it is not certain quite when his allegiance to the Cercle Pétain began and ended. But Ricœur’s lack of precision on these matters, more than half a century later, is not particularly surprising. I have long admired Ricœur both as a man and as a thinker, and I do not respect him any less for knowing that, for a period, he held views that he would later come to regret.5

And yet, it still seems odd that, a year after giving an account of his Pétainist period to Henry Rousso, Ricœur completely omitted any reference to it in a document intended for more public dissemination. This context encourages the sense that Ricœur’s account of his experience as a prisoner of war is only one possible configuration of events. In Réflexion faite, Ricœur makes his time as a POW sound like a surprisingly positive period in his life. We might suspect that his experiences could have been narrated very differently. Moreover, and this is the real intellectual crux of the current discussion, the view of the text as subject to quite different interpretations and narrativizations from the one foregrounded by its author-narrator is precisely in line with the hermeneutic theory which Ricœur himself would develop throughout his mature work. In his discussions of literary interpretation, Ricœur adamantly, consistently and persuasively argues that texts should not be understood as the partially realized instantiation of authorial intentions or desires. In the important article, ‘Le Modèle du texte: l’action sensée considérée comme un texte’ (in Du texte à l’action, pp. 183–211), for example, he argues that:

la carrière du texte s’échappe à l’horizon fini vécu par son auteur. Ce que dit le texte importe davantage que ce que l’auteur a voulu dire; désormais toute exégèse déploie ses procédures au sein de la circonscription de signification qui a rompu ses amarres avec la psychologie de son auteur. (p. 187)

5 More surprising (or disappointing), perhaps, is the reticence of biographers in discussing the episode. Reagan touches upon Pétainist sympathies among the POWs, but does not discuss the extent of Ricœur’s involvement (see Paul Ricœur, p. 10). Dosse discusses the period at greater length, but explains Ricœur’s involvement only in general terms. Ricœur himself did not seek to deny the episode, even if he was reticent and cautious in reference to it. See for example La Critique et la conviction: ‘Je dois à la vérité de dire que, jusqu’en 1941, j’avais été séduit, avec d’autres — la propagande était massive —, par certains aspects du pétainisme. […] Mais je regrette mon erreur de jugement, pendant la première année’ (pp. 31–32).
And Ricœur concludes that ‘seule l’interprétation est le “remède” à la faiblesses du discours que son auteur ne peut plus “sauver”’ (p. 188).

In Ricœur’s account, discourse needs interpretation; and interpretation cannot be bounded by what authors wanted, meant or thought they meant. And this must be as true of autobiographical works as it is of overtly fictional ones. I may have a strong investment in believing that the story of my life, as I tell it, is the truest possible version but, hermeneutically speaking, I have no justification for any such belief. Others may understand me better than I understand myself; and the stories others tell about me may be more true, or at least more compelling, more persuasive, than the ones I tell about myself. Ricœur concedes this or, to be more precise, he draws attention to it, he insists on it, in the second paragraph of the main text of Réflexion faite: ‘j’admets bien volontiers que la reconstruction que j’entreprends de mon développement intellectuel n’a pas plus d’autorité que telle autre effectuée par un biographe autre que moi-même’ (p. 12). This could not be clearer: an author does not know more about himself or his text than a reader; an autobiographer’s configuration of his life story should not be regarded as truer than that of a biographer. And as Ricœur insists elsewhere, a life story is never fixed. It can be recounted in different, sometimes contradictory ways: ‘de même qu’il est possible de composer plusieurs intrigues au sujet des mêmes incidents (lesquels, de même coup, ne méritent plus d’être appelés les mêmes événements), de même il est toujours possible de tramer sur sa propre vie des intrigues différentes, voire opposées’ (Temps et récit, III, p. 358). We can never assume that the narration of a life is definitive and finished.

In Ricœur’s account of his wartime experiences, there is a discomfiting tension between the acknowledgement that other ways of configuring the narrative are possible, and a palpable desire to direct the interpretation of the autobiographical subject’s life story. In general terms, I would hazard to say that texts contain within themselves instructions about how they wish to be read. I stress how they wish to be read, not how they must be read. Such instructions appear, for example, both explicitly in the text’s self-interpretation and through effects of juxtaposition. In the current case, Ricœur’s narrative of the war years stresses that they were ‘fruitful’ (fructueuses). The surrounding context implies his moral credentials in this period. The preceding paragraphs refer to the death of his father in the First World War, the later intensification of this loss by his realization of the injustice of the Versailles Treaty and his subsequent commitment as a Christian pacifist socialist.
The following paragraph describes his joyous rediscovery of his family in 1945, and his employment at the Collège Cévenol, which, we are reminded, had sheltered numerous Jewish children during the war. The understanding urged upon us by these juxtapositions is that Ricœur was a man of clear moral principles and integrity, and that his work at an institution which saved Jewish lives is of a piece with such integrity.

In this instance, Ricœur wants to underline positive aspects of the war years, the continuity of his moral principles despite changing political positions and the survival through the war of human, humane values. However, Ricœur’s own hermeneutic positions, as echoed at the beginning of Réflexion faite, allow equal priority to be given to different readings. In the context of what has now become public about his involvement in the Cercle Pétain, an alternative version of events is possible, in which the foregrounded account is partial and evasive, emphasizing the continuity of Ricœur’s principles and values rather than the suffering and compromised realities of the war. Ricœur argues, decisively in my view, that we do not own our life stories, that the way we emplot our life narratives entails a creation of meaning and order which is always subject to revision and reconfiguration. The story of our lives is important and real, but also unfinished and liable to radical reinterpretation and retelling. Yet, entirely understandably, while arguing this, Ricœur does not want to relinquish interpretive control of his own life narrative. He wants his war years, and those preceding and following them, to be a story of positive achievement, the survival of what is good in the human spirit and reconciliation with a traumatic past.

Towards an ethics of reconciliation

What does this have to do with Ricœur’s thought? As in subsequent chapters which discuss Althusser and Levinas, there is no question here of asserting a direct, causal link between what Ricœur experienced in the 1930s and 1940s and what he thought from the 1950s onwards. I nevertheless want to suggest that the issues which are at stake in Ricœur’s brief narrative of his time as a POW reverberate through his later thought and writing. The great themes of Ricœur’s thought all have direct relevance to the questions raised by his account of the war years, even if they do not broach them directly: history, time, truth, narrative, the configuration of the self, forgetfulness, amnesty and forgiveness. The war helps delimit an agenda for Ricœur’s post-war thought, and
that of post-war French philosophy more broadly. And the urgency of interpreting the meaning of conflict becomes specifically for Ricoeur the need to understand the conflict of interpretations. *Le Conflit des interprétations* is the title of Ricoeur’s 1969 collection of hermeneutic essays. French poststructuralism was vitiated by a surprising misunderstanding of hermeneutics, which it tended to characterize naively and simplistically as the belief in a single and recoverable sense. If the poststructuralists had read Ricoeur with even the minimum care, they would have known that this is a complete falsification of the hermeneutic tradition. Conflict, or the undecidability of competing interpretations, is at the heart of hermeneutics, and particularly of Ricoeur’s version of it. His great work of 1965, *De l’interprétation* – a work which has a compelling claim to be the most important contribution to hermeneutics written in French in the twentieth century – turns this conflict into war: Ricoeur refers to ‘la guerre des herméneutiques’ (p. 50). War, I want to suggest, has permeated the very fabric of his thought. It is what Ricoeur experiences, as a Christian, socialist, pacifist subject who spent five years as a prisoner of war; and it is also what defines, at the most fundamental level, what it means to be a post-war philosopher, and specifically a philosopher of hermeneutics. Thinking is conflict; hermeneutics is war.

But there is another twist here. Ricoeur’s *De l’interprétation* is well known for its brilliant, instructive distinction between two competing approaches to interpretation. On the one hand, we have interpretation as the restoration of sense. Its purpose is to discover what the author and the text properly mean, what their message to us might be. On the other hand, we have the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’, most importantly represented by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, which looks for unquestioned, occluded and denied meanings behind the intended messages conveyed by authors and texts. This is hermeneutics at war with itself. So what is our job as readers and interpreters: to find out what the text really means, or to uncover what it didn’t know it meant? The key point for Ricoeur is not to dwell on this conflict, but to overcome it. In his account, the *apparent* conflict within hermeneutics is resolved when one gets rid of the notion of a single, stable consciousness which regulates the meaning of a work. Once that is jettisoned, we can find ‘l’unité profonde’ (*De l’interprétation*, p. 61) of the two superficially opposed hermeneutics. Both are engaged in a search for meaning, which is understood now as inherently open and ambiguous. At the risk of appearing reductive, we might observe that this appeal to *unity* recalls the underlying, doomed and ultimately disastrous aspiration of Pétain’s
collaborationist politics after the defeat of 1940: the journal in which the wartime articles attributed to Ricœur were published was, after all, entitled *L’Unité française*.

This attempt to bring together conflicting positions is absolutely fundamental to Ricœur’s manner of thought and writing. The number and length of the books he published borders on being incomprehensible, without even considering the range of authors and topics he discusses. It is as if he wanted to omit no one and nothing, to bring everything together not so much in a grand synthesis as in a peaceful dialogue. This can be briefly illustrated with reference to the article ‘Le Modèle du texte’, which has already been quoted. Just in terms of its breadth of reference, it is impressive. Among others, Ricœur refers to great European thinkers (Kant, Hegel), representatives of the German hermeneutic tradition (Schleiermacher, Dilthey), Anglo-American speech act theorists (Austin, Searle), specialists in linguistics (Saussure, Hjelmslev, Benveniste, Chomsky) and structuralists (Lévi-Strauss). At no point does he give a sense that there might be irreconcilable differences between these thinkers and positions. Everyone can be brought together in a generous, all-encompassing discourse.

The references to E.D. Hirsch are particularly striking in this endeavour to find agreement. In his work on literary theory, Hirsch is associated more than anyone with the re-establishment of authorial intention as a regulative principle for literary interpretation. Against the prevailing view represented (very differently) by Wimsatt and Beardsley for the American New Critics and by Barthes for French structuralists and poststructuralists, Hirsch insists that the author is ‘the only compelling normative principle that could lend validity to an interpretation’ (*Validity*, p. 5). As we have seen, this is entirely contrary to Ricœur’s view. In the latter’s hermeneutics, the text is interesting precisely because it escapes the author’s horizon. Yet when Ricœur refers to Hirsch in ‘Le Modèle du texte’, one might get the impression that they are in complete agreement on fundamental questions. Ricœur endorses Hirsch’s insistence that ‘il n’existe pas de règle pour faire de bonnes conjectures. Mais il y a des méthodes pour valider les conjectures’ (*Du texte à l’action*, p. 200, quoting Hirsch, *Validity*, p. 25). And later, referring to the procedures of validation by which we might test our interpretive guesses, he writes: ‘je tiens comme Hirsch que [les procédures de validation] se rapprochent plus d’une logique de la probabilité que d’une logique de la vérification empirique’ (*Du texte à l’action*, p. 205; emphasis added). ‘Je tiens comme Hirsch’: this is striking not because Ricœur doesn’t agree with Hirsch
on this particular issue, but because he has endeavoured to find an issue on which he does agree with him in the face of so much underlying, fundamental disagreement. Rhetorically at least, Ricœur has succeeded in drawing even Hirsch into the consensual fold of his all-encompassing discourse.

At the level of argument, this quest for the compatibility of incompatibles is mirrored throughout ‘Le Modèle du texte’. The article concludes with a discussion of the relationship between structuralism and hermeneutics. The two are typically seen as fundamentally different in approach and aim: the first looks for general underlying structures, the second searches for particular meanings. Ricœur chooses Claude Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of myth to analyse the structuralist procedure. Lévi-Strauss describes mythèmes, which are the minimal units which can be combined to produce myths, in the same way that phonemes can be combined to produce words and sentences. This process is supposed to be anything but interpretive. Conceding this point, Ricœur nevertheless argues that structuralist analysis is a starting point not a conclusion: ‘En fait, nul ne s’en tient à une conception des mythes et des récits aussi formelle qu’une algèbre d’unités constitutives’ (Du texte à l’action, p. 212). Even for the arch structuralist Lévi-Strauss, mythemes bear meaning and reference; they are vehicles for reflections on birth and death, blindness and lucidity, sexuality and truth. Using the hermeneutic terms explanation and understanding, Ricœur now demonstrates that structural analysis turns out to be in the service of hermeneutic understanding. It is, he suggests, ‘un stade – un stade nécessaire – entre une interprétation naïve et une interprétation érudite, entre une interprétation de surface et une interprétation en profondeur’ (Du texte à l’action, p. 213). This is why hermeneutics is better described as a benign arc than as a vicious circle: structural analysis is a vital tool which furthers the aims of critical depth-interpretation. Understanding requires explanation; hermeneutics requires structural analysis. Any opposition between them is merely apparent, as they belong to the same intellectual endeavour to promote the human search for meaning. And the whole discussion is conducted with such charm, generosity and intellectual comprehensiveness that no one need feel offended or excluded. Everyone and everything gets to be part of the great debate.

Ricœur’s aim is to find the common ground between apparently conflicting positions. It turns out that the conflict of interpretations is not really a conflict. Rather, it bears witness to a generous, productive multiplicity. And I want to suggest here that this search for common
ground is absolutely fundamental to Ricœur’s thought and writing, because he insists on the possibility of dialogue and reconciliation between apparently competing approaches. The consistent impetus of Ricœur’s astonishingly voluminous, wide-ranging work – I would say its defining energy – is to refuse the choice between thinkers and movements which seem incompatible: at an individual level between, for example, Gadamer and Habermas; at a more general level between continental philosophy and analytic philosophy; phenomenology and hermeneutics; phenomenology and structuralism; structuralism and hermeneutics; narratology and hermeneutics; the hermeneutics of faith and the hermeneutics of suspicion. In all these cases, it turns out that differences, conflicts, are apparent rather than real. They can be overcome once we learn how to look at them properly. Conflict can be resolved once we understand that it is a mode of unacknowledged agreement.

Although Ricœur is perhaps best known as the theorist of the conflict of interpretations and the war of hermeneutics, his thought is driven by the search for the underlying agreement between manifestly warring positions. As he repeatedly, crucially, insists, the circle of hermeneutics is not vicious; it is better described as an arc or a spiral. By traversing it, we end up somewhere different from and better than where we started. Once they are understood from this generous, overarching philosophical perspective, war isn’t war, conflict isn’t conflict. The violence of interpretation isn’t so violent after all; differences can be reconciled. Ricœur’s endeavour of thought is to create complex contexts in which we do not have to choose between positions which might seem to be in conflict. But perhaps this covers over stark choices too readily. In relation to Ricœur’s account of his wartime years, it really does matter – more than Ricœur wanted to concede – whether what is most important is that it affirms the warm, life-enhancing human experience of captivity or evades the compromises, errors and misjudgements that were also part of it. Sometimes perhaps conflicts really are conflicts; incompatibles really are incompatible. Sometimes perhaps you do have to choose.

Hermeneutics entails the realization that texts and people do not say or know exactly what they mean or everything that they mean. More compellingly than anyone else, Ricœur argued that the consequence of this is that authors cannot close down the meaning of their works and that lives can always be narrated differently. His brief references to his own experiences during the war exemplify these points dramatically. Ricœur certainly does not exhaust and cannot control the sense of his own self-narrative, however much – contrary to his own theoretical positions
– he might have found it desirable to do so. Indeed, I have suggested that the tantalizing, unsatisfactory nature of his short account may actually raise suspicion, drawing the alert reader’s attention to the possibility that something remains unsaid. Because of the loss of his father in the First World War, a loss compounded and made more disturbing by Ricœur’s later sense that his father had died for a misguided cause, war was part of Ricœur’s thinking well before the Second World War, as he dealt with the conflict between reason and faith in philosophy, and between pacifism and rising fascism in politics. After the Second World War, I have suggested, this reference to conflict – and, crucially, the conviction in the possibility of its resolution – remained a vital, driving component in his mature work. War haunts Ricœur’s life, his texts and his thought even when it is not mentioned. In the next chapter, I shall suggest that the same can be said of two other great philosophers of the post-war period who also spent the war as POWs: Louis Althusser and Emmanuel Levinas. Their thought is certainly not the same as Ricœur’s, and their experiences were not the same; but all three of them share an ongoing, unredeemable investment in the past that will not pass.