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Ben Roth  
Marlboro Institute for Liberal Arts  
Emerson College, USA  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8799-7568>  
ben\_roth2@emerson.edu

## From Ricoeur Back to Heidegger on Narrative and Self-Understanding

### Abstract:

A Heideggerian conception of our narrative self-understanding is compared to Paul Ricoeur's more familiar version. Where Ricoeur's threefold mimesis conceives of literary texts as configuring unformed temporal experience and mediating between a writer's and reader's understanding, the Heideggerian approach holds our orientation toward our temporal existence to be already narrative in form, though usually implicit; working it out explicitly in texts is optional and can be more or less distorting or authentic. Where Ricoeur describes a dialectic between identity as sameness and selfhood, the Heideggerian approach holds that sameness does not properly apply to our distinctive form of existence. A phenomenology of the self's narrativity need not be reconciled with the metaphysics of identity, but should instead be seen as thematizing a different aspect of our being.

### Keywords:

Heidegger, Ricoeur, narrative, the self, identity, temporality

I see in the plots we invent the privileged means by which we re-configure our confused, unformed, and at the limit mute temporal experience.

—Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*<sup>1</sup>

Elsewhere, I have begun to develop a Heideggerian conception of the narrative self.<sup>2</sup> Where other theories stress master metaphors of character or authorship, this conception holds that we interpret our ongoing lives in the same way that we interpret a narrative when in the middle of it. We are provisionally oriented toward multiple possibilities for the future and also constantly able to reinterpret past actualities based on their place in a larger, evolving structure of meaning. Further, such an approach is not merely metaphorical, since this specific readerly stance – which Heidegger theorizes as the basis of our orientation as persons in time as “thrown projection” and Wolfgang Iser theorizes as the phenomenology of reading as “the wandering viewpoint” – applies to lives and narratives, but nothing else.<sup>3</sup> No philosopher’s name is more closely associated with narrative than Paul Ricoeur’s. Here, I offer an extended comparison to his claims in order to clarify this revised theory of the narrative self. Ricoeur takes up much of Heidegger’s lineage, yet turns his attention, in a way that Heidegger does not, to narrative. Ricoeur’s project is less relevant to my purposes than one might expect, however. This is true for a number of reasons.

First, Ricoeur takes a different part of *Being and Time* as his foundation. Numerous narrativists cite Heidegger as an influence, but their treatment of his work is brief and based on the analyses, from the second division of *Being and Time*, of being-towards-death and historicity.<sup>4</sup> Ricoeur’s commentary on Heidegger is more extensive<sup>5</sup> (though

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1) Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, xi. All further references cited parenthetically as TN and volume number.

2) This article is based on a section of my doctoral dissertation. Roth, “Narrative, Understanding, and the Self,” chapter 7, section IV.

3) Roth, “Reading from the Middle” and “Narrative, Understanding, and the Self,” part 2.

4) See especially Taylor, *Sources of the Self* and Guignon, *Heidegger and the Problem of Knowledge*. Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* remains, in my opinion, the single best book on this topic, but works from Husserl rather than Heidegger.

5) See especially TN1, 60–64 and TN3, 60–96.

never systematic), but based on division two as well. He writes: “In the Heideggerian analysis of temporality, in *Being and Time*, Augustine’s breakthrough [the analysis of time in Book 11 of the *Confessions*] is exploited in the most decisive way, even though this occurs ... beginning from Heidegger’s meditation on being-towards-death and not, as in Augustine, from the structure of the threefold present” (TN1, 85). This is not so, I think. I regard Heidegger’s analysis of being-towards-death and authenticity as optional, based on one normative ideal among many; I have started from his analysis of thrown projection instead (two thirds of the threefold present), arguing that it provides a foundation for narrativity (and temporality), even leaving being-towards-death aside. Ricoeur writes further: “At first glance, the relation between this analysis of within-time-ness and narrative seems quite distant. Heidegger’s text ... even seems to leave no place for it, inasmuch as the tie between history and time occurs, in *Being and Time*, at the level of historicity, not at that of within-time-ness” (TN1, 63). With this too I disagree. It may be true that the tie between history, in a broader sense, and time occurs later in *Being and Time*. But the tie between the self’s everyday, banal personal history and time – Dasein as something which exists only temporally, and which is uniquely oriented toward its future – is rooted already in the early moves of the book, where I have grounded my analysis. So Ricoeur begins his discussion already above the level of my more foundational concerns.

Second, Ricoeur, like many other thinkers, is guided by an excessively restrictive notion of narrative. Plot, Ricoeur claims, requires an intelligible order, a “thought” uniting it, a “point, theme” (TN1, 67). Even a novel like *The Magic Mountain* requires one real question, one theme, according to Ricoeur (TN2, 116). I agree instead with Walter Benjamin that we are drawn to narrative because it is “inexhaustible.”<sup>6</sup> The invocation of one theme – time, for example – or one question – How are “the experience of time, deadly sickness, and the great debate over the destiny of culture” integrated through the lens of Hans Castorp? (TN2, 116) – might indeed guide one’s investigation of a work like Mann’s. But I do not know what it could mean to say that one theme or question unifies every last strand of a work as vast, rich, and inexhaustible as *The Magic Mountain*. Further,

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6) Benjamin, “The Storyteller.” Ricoeur uses this same term to describe narrative: “Every text ... is revealed to be inexhaustible in terms of reading (TN3, 169; see too TN1, 75). This seems irreconcilable with his emphasis on singular unifying themes.

some narratives present multiple possibilities – and it is these that best get at the projecting nature of our way of being in the world. I will say more about this difference between Ricoeur’s account and my own under the heading of *mimesis*<sub>2</sub>. But Ricoeur (again, like many other theorists) requires much more unity of narrative than I think we should.

Third, and following closely from the previous point, Ricoeur views the relationship between lived experience and narrative as more heavily mediated than I do.<sup>7</sup> He refers to the “prenarrative structure of experience” (TN1, 59, 60, 74), but experience remains prior to narrative, only a candidate for it. Narrative is characterized, for him, by its unifying function because, on the other side, experience is first so fractured. As in the epigraph above, for Ricoeur experience is first “confused” and “unformed,” then we “re-configure” it. Heidegger suggests that, on the contrary, confusion is an exceptional state. Normally, we experience our being temporally, as already formed by the structure of thrown projection, directed by our concern, and as having meaning in a way that the merely natural does not. Plot does not normally “re-configure” our experience, but merely makes explicit in language the structure our experience already has. We can build on this initial level of organization, re-organizing our experience according to artistic, aesthetically pleasing forms. But whether we do so or not, our experience is already organized in a way that is deserving of the name “narrative.” Plot can of course distort or domesticate what structure is already there into something else, often more familiar or consoling – but it does not necessarily, categorically do so. Ricoeur writes at one point that he “shall not linger” on narrative in ordinary life (TN2, 156). This is just what I have tried to do, below even the level of “narrative as it is already practiced in the transactions of ordinary discourse” (TN2, 156).

With these framing differences in mind, I turn now more substantively to Ricoeur’s claims. It is not quite accurate to say that Ricoeur has a theory of the narrative self, at least not in the way that, for example, Marya Schechtman does. Schechtman offers a clear schema of the narrative activity a human being must (at least be able to) undertake in order to achieve full personhood.<sup>8</sup> Ricoeur’s erudition can have the unfor-

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7) Ricoeur distinguishes between Heidegger’s “short route” to ontology, which examines Dasein’s existence directly, and his own “long route” which examines human existence via language and hermeneutics. Ricoeur, “Existence and Hermeneutics,” 6ff.

8) Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves*.

tunate effect, for this reader at least, of obscuring his own central theses.<sup>9</sup> *Time and Narrative* and *Oneself as Another* (as well as Ricoeur's other works) offer rich reflections on temporality, narrative, history, and the self. But they do not do anything like lay out a set of conditions (like Schechtman's articulation and reality constraints) that define personhood. As others have pointed out, Ricoeur's tone (despite his erudition) is admirably humble: philosophy is hard work, and few universal claims can be ventured without hubris.<sup>10</sup> Where one sort of philosophical sensibility finds it most fruitful to offer bold theories, baldly stated, in full knowledge that they are likely to be proved inadequate and in need of revision, another moves forward probingly, always contextualizing its path, unsure that the vast storehouse of historical sources has yet been adequately examined. Ricoeur follows the latter path. I proceed by outlining two of his key notions: threefold mimesis from *Time and Narrative* and the dialectic of *idem* and *ipse* identity in *Oneself as Another*. The influence of Ricoeur's work on my own is great – it is certainly the case that I see so much narrativity in Heidegger only because I have read Ricoeur – but has remained largely in the background. Here I bring it to the forefront while at the same time highlighting how my project differs from his.

### The Hermeneutic Spiral of Threefold Mimesis

How exactly we should understand the ancient Greek concept of mimesis – usually translated as imitation or representation – is a matter of great scholarly dispute, but a dispute I will not enter into here.<sup>11</sup> I aim only to present Ricoeur's version of the concept, and then show how his view of the arc from the world, through text, back to the world, differs from my own. Ricoeur's overall thesis in the three volumes of *Time and Narrative* is: "time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience" (TN1, 3; see too 52). This vast, non-vicious (Ricoeur

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9) Carr notes that, after having read the first volume of *Time and Narrative*, he remained unsure where Ricoeur stood on the relation between narrative and real life. Wood, *On Paul Ricoeur*, 162.

10) "Ricoeur's work is wide-ranging and difficult, but includes a welcome stress on the humility necessary to the pursuit of truth." Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 330. Simon Critchley refers to Ricoeur as "the great and gentle hermeneutician." Critchley, *The Book of Dead Philosophers*, 230.

11) See Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis* for an overview and particular take.

argues) circle between time and narrative, in which time is humanized and narrative explores temporality, is based in particular moments of mimesis, where the reciprocal relationship between text and world is realized. In his view of mimesis, Ricoeur follows Aristotle rather than Plato (or, at least, the view of mimesis associated with the critique of poetry in the *Republic*): “If we translate mimesis by ‘representation’ ... we must not understand by this word some redoubling of presence, as we could still do for Platonic mimesis, but rather the break that opens the space for fiction” (TN1, 45). Indeed, for Ricoeur, in order to understand mimesis we must expand the scope of the discussion, examining not just a text’s mimetic relationship to the (or a) world, but situating the text between its maker on one side and its reader on the other. Mimesis is thus divided into three movements: mimesis<sub>1</sub>, mimesis<sub>2</sub>, and mimesis<sub>3</sub>.

*Mimesis*: Ricoeur writes that “whatever the innovative force of poetic composition within the field of our temporal experience may be, the composition of the plot is grounded in a pre-understanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character” (TN1, 54). Alasdair MacIntyre sees the logic of action and narrative as the same, such that we can talk about the narrative structure of our behavior, enacted but unnarrated.<sup>12</sup> Ricoeur is unwilling to go quite so far, placing as he does much more emphasis on the mediation that cultural types play in bringing this (near) isomorphism about: “A logic of possible narrative units is still only a logic of action. To become a logic of narrative it has to turn toward recognized cultural configurations, toward the schematism of narrative constituted by the plot-types handed down by tradition” (TN2, 43).<sup>13</sup> The circle between time and narrative functions as it does only because any act of mimesis has been preceded by many others. “I would rather speak [not of a hermeneutic circle, but instead] of an endless spiral that would carry the meditation past the same point a number of times, but at different altitudes,” he writes (TN1, 72). No attempt is made to recover the first, pre-historical movement from temporal experience to narrative, because we find ourselves already in the middle, with our previous experience of narrative mediating our experience of time. Thus Ricoeur refers to “a prenarrative quality of experience” (TN1, 74). Our experience of others’ and

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12) MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 212.

13) For Ricoeur on MacIntyre, see Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 158–59. All further references cited parenthetically as OA.

our own behavior is not formless: “If, in fact, human action can be narrated, it is because it is always already articulated by signs, rules, and norms” (TN1, 57). The relevant signs are not separable from narrative structures and terms, because human action is understood by contextualizing behavior within larger temporal arcs: “Narrative understanding is not limited to presupposing a familiarity with the conceptual network constitutive of the semantics of action. It further requires a familiarity with the rules of composition that govern the diachronic order of a story” (TN1, 56).<sup>14</sup>

Yet Ricoeur hesitates: “The equation between narrative and time remains implicit... I shall not push my analysis of the temporal elements of action to the point where we could rightfully speak of a narrative structure, or at least a pre-narrative structure of temporal experience” (TN1, 59). I have always found it surprising the extent to which Ricoeur cuts off discussion of our implicit, everyday narrative understanding. He is interested instead in a dialectic that plays out more slowly and elaborately, between our understanding of time, our reading of literary works, and then our revised, humanized understanding of time. The following passages help make sense of his lack of interest in a more immediate narrative understanding: “Thanks to writing, man and only man has a world and not just a situation... In the same manner that the text frees its meaning from the tutelage of the mental intention, it frees its reference from the limits of situational reference.”<sup>15</sup> Only with writing, Ricoeur claims, are we freed from the immediate here and now. So absent an engagement with literature, our situational understanding cannot be robustly extended in time and therefore in narrative, it would seem. (A naïve objection: does an illiterate person, possessing spoken but not written language, really not have a world, according to Ricoeur’s claim?) In another passage he writes, quite movingly, “for me, the world is the whole set of references opened by every sort of descriptive or poetic text I have read, interpreted, or loved. To understand these texts is to interpolate among the predicates of our situation all those meanings that, from a simple environment (*Umwelt*), make a world (*Welt*). Indeed, we owe a large part of the enlarging of our horizon of experience to poetic works” (TN1, 80). Continuing the previous passage, Ricoeur writes:

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14) MacIntyre makes the same point more slowly through his example of a gardener. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 206ff.

15) Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 36.

In this sense, Heidegger rightly says, in his analysis of *Verstehen* in *Being and Time*, that what we understand first in a discourse is not another person, but a “pro-ject,” that is, the outline of a new way of being in the world. Only writing ... in freeing itself, not only from its author and from its ordinary audience, but from the narrowness of the dialogical situation, reveals this destination of discourse as projecting a world.<sup>16</sup>

For Heidegger, it seems to me, it is our possession not of writing but of discourse – a possession which infiltrates back into even our seemingly non-linguistic activities – which allows for projection. Ricoeur seems to want to say that because we write, we can exist in possibilities beyond our immediate situation, can exist in a world rather than a mere environment. Heidegger would reverse this claim, I think: because we exist in possibilities, because we always have a world, we are able to write, and even finally develop literary means of capturing the place of possibility over actuality.

The disagreement comes down to how structured our initial level of experience is. Ricoeur begins his analysis with a discussion of Augustine’s *Confessions*: “Augustine groaned under the existential burden of discordance” (TN1, 31). He turns then to Aristotle’s *Poetics*: “Aristotle discerns in the poetic act par excellence – the composing of the tragic poem – the triumph of concordance over discordance” (TN1, 31). I fear that Ricoeur overplays this dichotomy: temporal experience is not as discordant, and narrative need not be as unifying, as the Augustinian and Aristotelian models suppose. But if temporal experience is indeed initially discordant, then mimesis<sub>1</sub>, the pre-understanding we have of the world, can no more than verge on narrative form. Given the dichotomy, Ricoeur writes that narrative is “an eminently verbal experience where concordance mends discordance” (TN1, 31). This takes us into mimesis<sub>2</sub>, in which the (for Ricoeur) at best prenarrative structure of the understanding becomes textual. “What makes a story (or stories) of action?” he asks (TN1, 44).

*Mimesis*<sub>2</sub>: “A story ... must be more than just an enumeration of events in serial order; it must organize them into an intelligible whole, of a sort that we can always ask what is the ‘thought’ of this story,” Ricoeur writes (TN1, 65). “A narrative that

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16) Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 37.

fails to explain is less than a narrative” (TN1, 148). I have challenged this standard, suggesting that the qualities various thinkers claim as that which unifies disparate events into a narrative merely track their own, ultimately contingent, tastes.<sup>17</sup> J. David Velleman, for example, argues that events must enact a typical emotional arc in order to rise to narrative,<sup>18</sup> but this merely demonstrates that he (like many readers) thinks *good* narratives play out typical emotional arcs. Ricoeur does not identify a specific standard, but he agrees that there is a gap between merely serial events and narrative proper: “emplotment is the operation that draws a configuration out of a simple succession”; “narrative time grafts its configurations” onto temporal elements; “It is the work of the configuring activity”; “narrative gives form to what is unformed” (TN1, 65, 59, 66, 72).

Ricoeur compares plot’s unifying function to that of judgment:

This configurational act consists of “grasping together” the detailed actions or what I have called the story’s incidents. It draws from this manifold of events the unity of one temporal whole. I cannot overemphasize the kinship between this “grasping together,” proper to the configurational act, and what Kant has to say about the operation of judging. (TN1, 66)

Such formative operations are the result of the artist’s compositional intelligence, at the heart of mimesis<sub>2</sub>. The analogy to Kant is misleading until clarified, since, for Ricoeur, the emplotment of events is not an automatic operation of our form of mindedness:

The kinship is greater still with the reflective judgment which Kant opposes to the determining one, in the sense that it reflects upon the work of thinking at work in the aesthetic judgment of taste and in the teleological judgment applied to organic wholes. The act of emplotment has a similar function inasmuch as it extracts a configuration from a succession. (TN1, 66)

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17) Roth, “Narrative, Understanding, and the Self,” chapter 3.

18) Velleman, “Narrative Explanation.”

If emplotment were automatic, as our determining application of the table of categories is, then Ricoeur would have no reason to hesitate over the prenarrative understanding discussed under the heading of mimesis<sub>1</sub>. If automatic, then our implicit, pre-textual understanding would already be truly narrative in form. This is the view I have defended, but for Ricoeur, full emplotment occurs only through the work of the artist.

Thus Ricoeur emphasizes the unity of well-ordered plot: “Thanks to this reflective act, the entire plot can be translated into one ‘thought,’ which is nothing other than its ‘point’ or ‘theme’” (TN1, 67). Throughout his discussion, Ricoeur takes his definitional cues from Aristotle’s *Poetics*. As has often been pointed out (not without controversy and disagreement), however, the *Poetics* is not (merely) a definitional text, but (at least to some extent) a prescriptive one; it can be read as a how-to manual for ancient tragedy. A play should not be too long, since audiences can only sit at attention for a certain length of time. The improbable should be avoided, lest the audience’s suspension of their disbelief fail (to put it in modern terms). But an overly long play, or one featuring an improbable plot, does not, due to those qualities, cease to be a play. Aristotle’s method of inquiring into the best of some type in order to establish its essence is here especially misleading.

Ricoeur seeks to move beyond Aristotle, seeks “to disengage this configuring activity from the limiting constraints the paradigm of tragedy imposes upon the concept of emplotment” (TN1, 64). I would suggest that he is unable to free himself of certain key restraints, the same which ultimately hold back MacIntyre’s and Taylor’s analyses.<sup>19</sup> Just as there is no reason to think that a person’s desires and goals do (or perhaps even should) unite into one hierarchy, organized by a highest hyper-good, the object of his or her life quest, there is no reason to think that a narrative must find unified order simply to be a narrative.<sup>20</sup> Like others, Ricoeur has to dismiss much of recent fiction from his discussion. “The contemporary novel, in large part, may be defined as an antinovel,” he writes (TN1, 70). “By means of the frustrations engendered by their ironic mistrust of any paradigm, and thanks to the more or less

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19) Roth, “Narrative, Understanding, and the Self,” chapter 1.

20) In fact, I would argue that the narratives that come closest to achieving this ideal of order are *bad*. Stories that relentlessly pursue one theme inevitably feel didactic. They also abandon the great pleasure to be found in perfectly tossed off observations, which are sprinkled liberally throughout most fiction.

perverse pleasure the reader takes in being excited and gulled by them, these works satisfy both the tradition they leave behind and the disorganized experiences they finally end up imitating by dint of not imitating the received paradigms” (TN1, 73). Ricoeur turns his attention, at length, to the modernist novel, discussing Proust, *The Magic Mountain*, and *Mrs. Dalloway* (TN2). But he is drawn to these masterpieces because they explicitly thematize time. That is, he is drawn first and foremost to their content. I have argued that some of the works he would label “antinovels” best represent, in their formal innovations rather than content, the narrative form of our experience: as oriented provisionally toward a multiplicity of future possibilities.<sup>21</sup> They are able to do so because they are not as wedded to unity as Ricoeur requires.

*Mimesis*<sub>3</sub>: What Ricoeur calls antinovels shift the burden of emplotment from the artist to the reader: “the written work is a sketch for reading. Indeed, it consists of holes, lacunae, zones of indetermination, which, as in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, challenge the reader’s capacity to configure what the author seems to take malign delight in defiguring. In such an extreme case, it is the reader, almost abandoned by the work, who carries the burden of emplotment” (TN1, 77). The example of antinovels moves us from *mimesis*<sub>2</sub>, in which the artist creates a text, to *mimesis*<sub>3</sub>, in which the text is received by the reader. “Structuration is an oriented activity that is only completed in the spectator or the reader,” Ricoeur writes (TN1, 48). “It is in the hearer or the reader that the traversal of *mimesis* reaches its fulfillment” (TN1, 71). Whereas *mimesis*<sub>1</sub> thematizes the pre-understanding of the artist, in which action is understood in a prenarrative form, prior to the artist’s act of configuring events into a fully emplotted text, *mimesis*<sub>3</sub>, on the other side, thematizes the way in which the reader brings the text back to practical activity and the logic of action: “*mimesis*<sub>3</sub> marks the intersection ... of the world configured by the poem and the world wherein real action occurs and unfolds its specific temporality” (TN1, 71). In *mimesis*<sub>3</sub> the hermeneutic circle is closed – from action to text, back to action – or, as Ricoeur prefers, one pass on the hermeneutic spiral is completed. In a text, the reader is given a model for how to understand time’s organization. This understanding might return in a later moment of *mimesis*<sub>3</sub>, as the reader, now confronted by action in the world, will have a revised prenarrative understanding through which experience is filtered.

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21) Roth, “Narrative, Understanding, and the Self,” chapter 7.

The fear of vicious circularity keeps Ricoeur from making more, as I think we should, of the (pre)narrative form of our understanding: “Whether we consider the semantic structure of action, its resources for symbolization, or its temporal character, the end point seems to lead back to the starting point or, worse, the end point seems anticipated in the starting point. If such were the case, the hermeneutic circle of mimesis and temporality would resolve into the vicious circle of mimesis alone” (TN1, 71–72). Ricoeur argues that such a charge arises only given one of two misunderstandings: “the violence of interpretation” or, alternatively, “its redundancy” (TN1, 72). If interpretation violently reforms experience, “puts consonance where there was only dissonance,” then the hermeneutic circle becomes vicious because its result – humanized, organized time – is merely read back, falsely, into temporal experience. To this Ricoeur responds by softening the dichotomy between Augustine and Aristotle, suggesting that both temporal and narrative experience involve a play between concordance and discordance. Such a response invites the second objection, however, that interpretation is “redundant”: “If there is no human experience that is not already mediated by symbolic systems and, among them, by narratives, it seems vain to say, as I have, that action is in quest of narrative” (TN1, 74). To this Ricoeur responds by insisting that temporal experience is merely prenarrative in quality, appealing to the intuitive weight of expressions like an “(as yet) untold story.” It seems to me that my Heideggerian conception offers a clearer way forward. Not all experience is narrativized, which gives us a telling contrast between our experience of ourselves – as beings that exist only temporally – and other experiences. But we can identify in our self-experience a narrative structure, usually implicit, that can be made explicit and fully textual.

With the three moments of mimesis now before us, we can turn to Ricoeur’s summary of their interrelation: “I take it as established that mimesis<sub>2</sub> constitutes the pivot of this analysis” (TN1, 53). Mimesis<sub>2</sub> is the activity of the artist, by which events are organized textually into a whole and unified plot. The extent to which mimesis<sub>2</sub> is understandable in isolation depends on the framework of one’s approach:

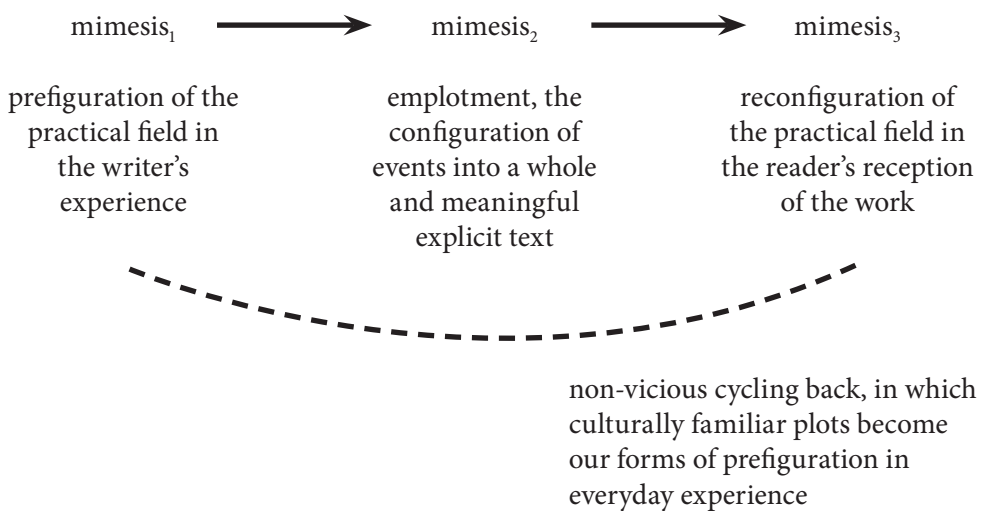
A science of the text can be established only upon the abstraction of mimesis<sub>2</sub>, and may consider only the internal laws of a work of literature, without any regard for the two sides of the text. It is the task of

hermeneutics, in return, to reconstruct the set of operations by which a work lifts itself above the opaque depths of living, acting, and suffering, to be given by an author to readers who receive it and thereby change their acting. For a semiotic theory, the only operative concept is that of the literary text. Hermeneutics, however, is concerned with reconstructing the entire arc of operations by which practical experience provides itself with works, authors, and readers. It does not confine itself to setting  $mimesis_2$  between  $mimesis_1$  and  $mimesis_3$ . It wants to characterize  $mimesis_2$  by its mediating function. What is at stake, therefore, is the concrete process by which the textural configuration mediates between the prefiguration of the practical field and its reconfiguration through the reception of the work. (TN1, 53)

Following structuralist literary criticism, a pure science of the text as text would ignore the role of the author in making it and the role of the reader in consuming it. Yet a full understanding of the process by which texts are written and read, which Ricoeur here calls “hermeneutics,” would integrate both of these movements as well.

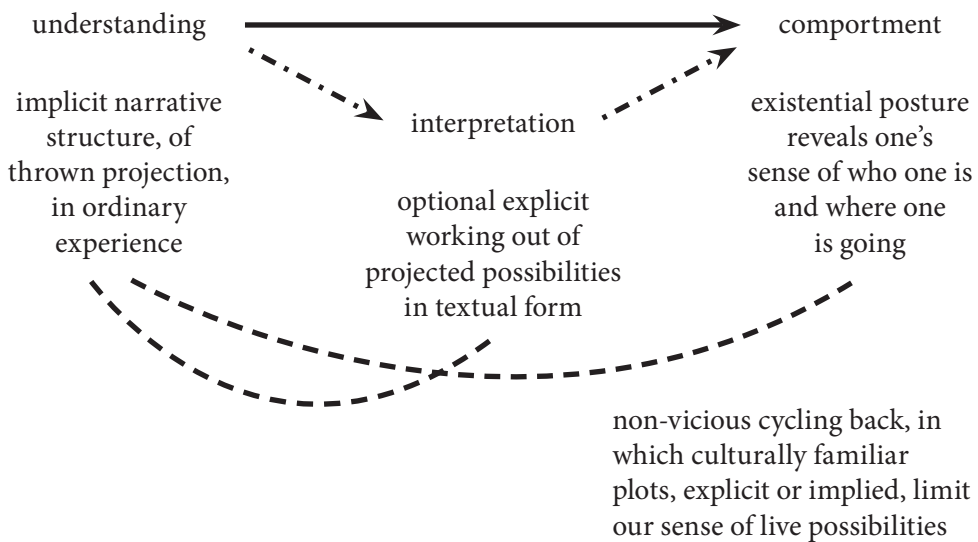
Ricoeur’s notion of threefold mimesis can be modeled as follows:

*Figure 1: Ricoeur’s Threefold Mimesis*



Ricoeur glosses the movement from mimesis<sub>1</sub>, through mimesis<sub>2</sub>, to mimesis<sub>3</sub>, as one of “describing, narrating, prescribing” (OA, 140). By contrast, my own claim is that our ordinary understanding of ourselves is already implicitly narrative in structure, whether or not this gives rise to an explicit text. We can traverse the full arc from “the opaque depths of living, acting, suffering” to “chang[ing] [our] acting” without the intervention of an explicit text.

Figure 2: Ricoeur’s Structure Revised



Our understanding is still characterized as narrative in form because it is structured in the same way as the readerly reception of a text and because, were we called upon to make our understanding explicit, narrative discourse would best allow us to do so.

How might Ricoeur object to such a revision? As quoted above, he writes that “a logic of possible narrative units is still only a logic of action. To become a logic of narrative it has to turn toward recognized cultural configurations, toward the schematism of narrative constituted by the plot-types handed down by tradition” (TN2, 43). This would seem to suggest that the kinds of narratives I have identified as most closely modeling the form of our projective understanding are not, for Ricoeur, properly narratives at all. They operate, whether through the modernist mechanism of internal monologue or the postmodernist mechanism of forking paths, according to “a logic

of possible narrative units.” But what happens when, with Woolf’s or Joyce’s prose, or with a story like Robert Coover’s “The Babysitter” or a film like *Mr. Nobody*, a logic of narrative units becomes a recognized cultural configuration? And, if it is the case that such forms better represent the way that we exist not merely in actualities, but in possibilities, is it not crucial that such forms achieve recognition? If they do not, then does narrative not risk playing a simplifying and merely consoling function, domesticating our manner of existence by erasing possibilities in the name of one actual plot line? If, as Ricoeur claims, narrative involves the play between concordance and discordance, this is just why it, unlike more straightforward forms of description and assertion, might allow us to put our form of existing into words.

At stake is the question of how to understand the process of enculturation. In a hypothesized state of nature, where Ricoeur’s hermeneutic spiral would have begun its ascending course, we might imagine beings who, as yet unexposed to narrative’s forms of organization, might have experienced time as truly discordant. Myths and other early forms of storytelling emerge, according to the implicit genealogy, in order to make time bearable. And as particular forms were regularized, beings enculturated according to them would find their experience of time revised, no longer wholly chaotic but softened instead by the filtering of mythical forms in their now prenarrative understanding. The same process plays out in miniature in children, as they are enculturated into a set of ways of organizing temporal experience. But at both scales, it seems to me, the innocent – whether inhabiting the state of nature or childhood – is never “us.” If Heidegger is right that our way of being has at its center our thrown and projecting experience of time, then “we” are not there until higher up on Ricoeur’s spiral, where temporality’s discordance has already been mended.

### The Dialectic of *Idem* and *Iipse* Identity

In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur narrows his focus from our narrative experience of time to the theme of the self: “I propose to reconstruct here a theory of narrative, no longer considered from the perspective of its relation to the constitution of human time, as I did in *Time and Narrative*, but from that of its contribution to the constitution of the self” (OA, 114). Like Heidegger, Ricoeur analyzes and interprets the self against the

horizon of temporality: “The person of whom we are speaking and the agent on whom the action depends have a history, are their own history” (OA, 113). Approaches “from the perspective of identifying reference,” as well as those based on “the agent in the framework of the semantics of action,” fail: “What has been omitted in this way is not just one important dimension among others, but an entire problematic, namely that of *personal identity*, which can be articulated only in the temporal dimension of human existence” (OA, 113–14). “Identity” is a poly-vocal concept<sup>22</sup> and, absent recognition of the dimension of temporality, philosophy can speak to only one version of it.

Ricoeur distinguishes between two senses of identity: “On one side, identity as *sameness* (Latin *idem*); on the other, identity as *selfhood* (Latin *ipse*)” (OA, 116). *Idem* identity is that which we apply to objects in the world: “To this first component of the notion of identity corresponds the notion of identification, understood in the sense of the reidentification of the same: ... the same thing twice, *n* times” (OA, 116). *Idem* identity applies as well to the identification of the same type, rather than token, with “same” in such a case meaning “qualitative” rather than “numerical” identity (OA, 116). In yet a third case, when dealing with objects across greater expanses of time, “we appeal to another criterion ... namely the *uninterrupted continuity* between the first and the last stage in the development of what we consider to be the same individual (OA, 116). Yet this is still a matter of *idem* identity, identity as sameness. The oak tree is the same as the acorn from which it grew, an animal is the same one over the course of its life, and “so, too, we speak of a man or of a woman – I am not saying of a person – as a simple token of a species” (OA, 117). Ricoeur’s interjection, and his distinction between a man or woman and a person, follows Heidegger. “The sameness of one’s body conceals its selfhood,” he writes (OA, 33). “Understanding the way in which our own body is at once a body like any other (situated among other bodies) and an aspect of the self (its manner of being in the world) is a problem of vast proportions” (OA, 33). As “In Heidegger, the investigation of ‘who?’ belongs to the same ontological sphere as that of the self (*Selbstheit*)” (OA, 58).

Thus Ricoeur turns to *ipse* identity, identity as selfhood, which concerns “the question ‘who?’ inasmuch as it is irreducible to any question of ‘what?’” (OA, 118).

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22) Amélie Rorty lists some of our many categories for ourselves in “A Literary Postscript: Characters, Persons, Selves, Individuals.”

What makes me who I am? (Schechtman begins from the same distinction: *idem* identity is an answer to the “reidentification question,” while *ipse* identity is an answer to the “characterization question.”<sup>23</sup>) Crucially, “identity in the sense of *ipse* implies no assertion concerning some unchanging core of personality” (OA, 2). Yet the question of the continuity of the self – as a self – in time does not disappear. “Does the selfhood of the self imply a form of permanence in time which is not reducible to the determination of a substratum?” (OA, 118). What is sought is a way to understand our continuity through time, without an appeal to an unchanging substrate, of whatever kind. Ricoeur concludes his motivating comments: “It is therefore in the sphere of temporality that the mediation is to be sought” (OA, 124).

Ricoeur offers two analyses underlying his notion of narrative identity, which will mediate between *idem* and *ipse* identity: character and the keeping of promises. Character helps to explain the self’s sameness, while the keeping of promises helps to understand this sameness through time. He describes character as “the set of distinctive marks which permit the reidentification of a human individual as being the same,” and as “the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized” (OA, 119, 121). Yet the notion of character goes beyond *idem* identity, and how, for example, we reidentify an object as of the same token, type, or individual across large expanses of time. “The permanence of character with respect to persons results from the fact that the permanence of character expresses the almost complete mutual overlapping of the problematic of *idem* and *ipse*,” Ricoeur writes (OA, 118). Character, so long as it remains constant, allows us to reidentify someone as the same person despite other changes, serving as a criterion of *idem* identity. Yet we might also plausibly take our character as that which makes us *who* we are, extending character into the realm of *ipse* identity. Other potential criteria for reidentification – bodily continuity, but also psychological continuity, inasmuch as it is mere continuity that is important, not the specifics of psychological makeup – seem irrelevant to *ipse* identity. Yet character, taken as fixed, becomes just another substratum, unchanging and not distinctively temporal.

In promise keeping, temporality comes to the fore, but *idem* and *ipse* identity pull apart: “faithfulness to oneself in keeping one’s word marks the extreme gap between the permanence of the self and that of the same” (OA, 118). Promise keeping

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23) Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves*, Introduction.

enacts a miniature plot. The steadfastness of the self is not simply given, as one might fail to keep one's word, causing a rupture between the person who makes a promise and the person who breaks it. Instead, in upholding one's word, one asserts, one reaffirms oneself – now – as he or she who made the promise. Sameness in promise keeping is distinctively temporal, realized only when the plot arc of the promise is fulfilled in its multiple events.

Further reflection – and here we can see Ricoeur's dialectic playing out – suggests that in keeping a promise, one asserts as well *who* one is, asserts one's *ipse* identity. Furthermore, who one is in such an instance is a matter of character. We can thus begin to see character as more than an unchanging substratum: "characters, we will say, are themselves plots"; "character is therefore a narrative category as well" (OA, 143). Just as the plot of a promise made and kept reveals constancy of character, reveals one person as an ongoing who, other familiar plots do as well. A substratum of unchanging dispositions need not exist. Rather, plots usually turn on certain transformations of character. A person begins with a certain character ( $c_1$  at  $t_1$ ), then acts and suffers certain consequences, emerging with a changed character ( $c_2$  at  $t_2$ ). If that change of character is understandable as brought about by those events, then such a familiar plot allows us both to understand who that person is – at  $t_1$ , at  $t_2$ , and across time – and to identify him or her as one person over the course of that plot.

Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity will not, at least not without a great deal of elaboration, serve as a technical criterion of personal identity. If I promise to drive my friend to the airport tomorrow and, because I fall sick overnight, you uphold that promise, you are not me. Indeed, these ways of talking, in their application of "I" and "you," already assume we know how to identify and reidentify the agents involved. I do not think that Ricoeur harbors any illusions that his work bears on the technical metaphysics of personal identity, however.<sup>24</sup> Rather, he seeks to offer a bit of philosophical therapy which would defuse worries about personal identity, worries motivated by science-fictionalized puzzle cases such as those presented by Derek Parfit.

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24) "I have the gravest doubt concerning the use of the term 'criterion' in the framework of the present discussion... . In the case of sameness, the term 'criterion' has a very precise sense... . Is the same thing true with respect to selfhood? ... Does it not come instead within the province of *attestation*?" (OA, 129).

In his “Personal Identity,”<sup>25</sup> and at much greater length in *Reasons and Persons*, Parfit famously argues that there are instances in which the question of personal identity has no answer and, further, that “the question about identity has no importance.”<sup>26</sup> I wish only to suggest a reframing of Parfit’s claims, and a characterization of Ricoeur’s manner of grappling with them, so a review of the full details of his examples is unnecessary. Briefly: Parfit imagines cases in which persons might split or fuse. If we assume that “the question of identity must have an answer,”<sup>27</sup> then, after an instance of fission, we have to decide whether the original person is identical with both, one, or neither of the resulting persons. None of these answers seems satisfactory, however.<sup>28</sup> Parfit acknowledges that such cases are often dismissed because it is thought that “they could never occur.”<sup>29</sup> The splitting and fusing of persons is, he thinks, coherently imaginable, however, and thus they need to be dealt with. He uses an analysis of fission and fusion to argue that what actually matters in such instances is survival, and that survival can be pulled apart conceptually from identity. The larger form of Parfit’s argument, not quite articulated by him in this way, is that coherently imagined puzzle cases, thought through, allow us to clarify our concept of personal identity, such that we see that it is not what matters – it just happens to track most of the time with survival, which is what we should attend to.

Ricoeur writes of Parfit:

What presupposition grounds the construction of this puzzling case and a good many others, each more ingenious than the next? First of all, these are imaginary cases which remain conceivable, even when they may not be technically realizable. It is enough that they be neither logically nor physically impossible. The question will be whether they do not violate a constraint of another order, concerning human rootedness on this earth. (OA, 135)

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25) Parfit, “Personal Identity.”

26) *Ibid.*, 199.

27) *Ibid.*

28) *Ibid.*, 200ff.

29) *Ibid.*, 199.

Here Ricoeur suddenly shifts vocabulary and tradition:

In virtue of the mediating function of the body as one's own in the structure of being in the world, the feature of selfhood belonging to corporeality is extended to that of the world as it is inhabited corporeally. This feature defines the terrestrial condition as such and gives to the Earth the existential significance attributed to it in various ways in Nietzsche, Husserl, and Heidegger. The Earth is something different, and something more, than a planet: it is the mythical name of our corporeal anchoring in the world. (OA, 150)

Playing on the contrast between interstellar science fictions and Earth-bound ones, Ricoeur is in effect saying that the "persons" at the heart of Parfit's thought experiments are not sufficiently like us to tell us about ourselves, but instead "entities of a manipulable nature from which the question of selfhood has been eliminated as a matter of principle" (OA, 135). This is not to say that Ricoeur is unmoved by puzzle cases, only that he thinks we need to look to more fully imagined ones closer to home: "Literary fictions differ fundamentally from technological fictions in that they remain imaginative variations on an invariant, our corporeal condition experienced as the existential mediation between the self and the world" (OA, 150).

Rather than bracket, or perhaps even dismiss, science-fictional cases like Parfit's, as Ricoeur does, I think we can offer a reframing of them (though perhaps what follows is just an attempt to translate Ricoeur's claims back into something more like Parfit's vocabulary and tradition). Suppose we grant that the fission and fusion of persons, as well as brain transplants and teleportation, are coherently imaginable. This does not, I would suggest, force us to clarify our current concept of personal identity so that it can deal with them (or, if it cannot, to abandon it in favor of a neighboring concept like survival). Rather, we should admit that our concept of personal identity is a historically contingent construction, liable to further development. If one or another of Parfit's imagined technologies were to come about, it would be accompanied by great cultural change. Part of this cultural change would be an evolution of our concept of personal identity. Parfit refers to the possibilities of "new ways of talking"

and/or “changing the concept of a person.”<sup>30</sup> But philosophers do not, now, need to do these things in response to imagined new technologies. Were these technologies to actually develop, philosophers might play a role in the evolution of the concept of personal identity – but surely (if human intellectual history thus far is any guide) novelists, artists, journalists, clergy, politicians, jurists, and the wider citizenry would as well. If the fission of persons becomes possible, certain ways of talking about the status of the resulting beings will become conventionally accepted, in ways that we, now, probably cannot predict. Certainly Parfit’s quick and thin presentation of the psychology of fusion<sup>31</sup> is inadequate in helping us to do so,<sup>32</sup> bettered at least by the science-fiction writers who inspire such thought experiments.<sup>33</sup> We do not, as Parfit writes, “need a sense in which one person can survive as two.”<sup>34</sup> Rather, if and when the splitting of persons becomes possible, we will need such a sense. Or perhaps we will not, but will find instead a completely different way of culturally responding to such a technology (by banning it, for example, or by demonizing it and declaring the resulting beings “non-persons.”) So in place of Parfit’s “identity is not what matters,” we might say instead that identity still matters, even if it is possible that, given a sufficiently strange technological/cultural future, it will come to matter less, perhaps eventually not at all.

It seems to me that Ricoeur’s analyses point to a stronger set of final conclusions. He sanctions as a “major distinction” the Heideggerian idea that Dasein is available only to existential, not categorical, analysis (see OA, 123, especially note 9). Fully embraced, however, this distinction suggests that the relationship between *idem* and *ipse* identity does not need to be “mediated,” by a dialectic or otherwise (OA, 124). Rather, if Heidegger is correct that Dasein exists only temporally (and I think Ricoeur

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30) Ibid., 203.

31) Ibid., 212.

32) Galen Strawson’s presentation of the psychology of “episodics” is likewise inadequate to provide a richly relatable, rather than merely formally possible, counterexample to narrative understandings of the self. See Roth, “Narrative, Understanding, and the Self,” chapter 2.

33) Ricoeur’s interest in literature seems to end with modernism, but since then the softening of the line between literary and genre fiction has led to many more speculative fictions of psychological and sociological acuteness.

34) Parfit, “Personal Identity,” 206.

agrees that this is correct), then *idem* identity will prove not merely inadequate to an analysis of the self, but largely irrelevant. When we ask the reidentification question of an object (other than Dasein), we ask whether an object at time  $t_2$  is the same as the one at time  $t_1$ . We can ask this question of ourselves as bodies and as people. But if Dasein exists only *across* times  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  (and beyond), then it is nonsense to ask whether it is the same at these two different moments. It is what it is – indeed, it is at all (as Dasein and as a self, rather than as a body or human being) – only because of its existence across time.

If Heidegger is right that Dasein's temporal nature is unique, then it is hard to find an analogy to explain this claim. Perhaps the following helps, however. Consider a performance of a symphony. Someone asks, during the first movement, what piece of music it is. "Beethoven's *Fifth*," comes the reply. Then, during the fourth movement, he asks again: "what piece of music is this?" Again the reply: "Beethoven's *Fifth*." "Oh, like before," he says. Or worse: "Oh, the same piece again." Were someone to say this, he would not be incorrect, exactly, but it seems to me that he would be subtly misspeaking. What he should say is that "this is *still* the same piece of music." Beethoven's *Fifth* exists across a 30-minute performance of it. It does not exist at the five-minute mark, then exist again at the 25-minute mark. One can *recognize* Beethoven's *Fifth* on the basis of hearing a few bars from the first movement, and one can again *recognize* Beethoven's *Fifth* on the basis of hearing a few bars from the fourth movement. But one cannot *reidentify* what is heard during the fourth with what is heard during the first – not because those specific bars are different (or even potentially the same), but because in each case the specific bars only point to the larger whole. The symphony exists only *across* the span of its full performance, including these two moments. Within the frame of a performance of the symphony, reidentification does not have any meaning. (By contrast, one could reidentify the same phrase at two moments within one performance or, alternatively, identify two different performances of it as two tokens of the same type.) In the same way, if Dasein exists only across the span of its full life, then reidentification has no meaning with respect to it. We can reidentify a body, a mind, a person. But as Dasein – as a self, in the way I have been using the term – reidentification is largely irrelevant, often overlapping with other conceptions or what rather than who we are, but in a confusingly orthogonal manner. A Heideggerian approach to the narrativity of the self should embrace the radical conclusion that Ricoeur hesi-

tates over: that our identity as Dasein has to be approached in a way utterly different from the identity of objects.

To conclude, I will briefly mention a larger difference of sensibility between Ricoeur and Heidegger that the foregoing comparisons begin to bring into focus. My interest in Heidegger and narrative is in a way surprising, as his engagement with literary sources is almost exclusively with poetry. Ricoeur, by contrast, engages at great length with narrative fictions by Proust, Mann, and Woolf (TN2), among others. This is explained, I think, by the way in which Ricoeur views the relationship between time and narrative as heavily mediated by cultural works. For him, this mediation needs to be unpacked. For Heidegger, according to my interpretation, the work of cultural objects like novels is much more optional, an explicit working out of something that is fully there implicitly in our existential comportment. Furthermore, I take it that Heidegger is less interested in unpacking narrative fictions because, in their prosaicness, they tend to make explicit our inauthentic and everyday manner of being. Poetry merits more discussion, for him, because it seems to open up more authentic forms of understanding. Between Heidegger's phenomenology of our interpretive orientation within temporal existence and Ricoeur's discussions of some of the most magisterial modernist novels that explicitly thematize this aspect of our being, I am most interested in the way that the structures Heidegger describes are implicitly narrative in form, and in the way that a wider variety of literary forms make them explicit with more or less distortion. Much as I admire Ricoeur's work, Heidegger's seems to me more original – both in the sense of being more fundamental, getting at a more basic layer of our being, and in the sense of being more novel, offering a less familiar view of the interrelations between temporality, the self, narrative, and literature.

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