Reading as an Affective and Discursive Event
Its Contribution to Reshaping Human Identity

Robert Grzywacz

Abstract This paper deals with a twofold understanding of the notion of *event*. The first construal of the latter draws upon the philosophical framework of Marc Richir, in which that concept *event* corresponds to a process of phenomenalization occurring within a schematism that serves as a transcendental matrix for individual phenomena. It enables access to a sphere of fluctuating phenomena correlated with the non-intentional activity of *phantasia*, which precedes their symbolic institution. According to Richir, the experience of reading literature can exemplify this kind of phenomenalization, one that activates interaction with human affective experience.

The second concept of *event* referred to in the study is derived from the thought of Paul Ricoeur, and may be characterized as a discursive one, since the latter thinker emphasizes the transcendence of the merely event-referring dimension of discourse in favour of the meaning it conveys. In his elaborated theory of reading, Ricoeur describes the process as both active and passive: a wandering point of view on the world opened up by the text, a dynamic synthesis of sentential retentions and protentions, a bidirectional modification of the reader's expectations and memories, a search for meaning and a struggle with its absence, and a breakdown and reconstitution of narrative coherence. Yet Ricoeur's category of the *world* of the text appears to suggest a certain kind of symbolic and ontological institution. At the stage of existential appropriation of textual proposals, these proposals are directed toward the imagination (operating intentionally), not toward fantasy (non-intentional).

The paper examines some consequences of both views of the act of reading through the lens of two selected narratives from *Difficult Loves* by Italo Calvino. The aim of this final investigation consists in assessing, from the perspective of reading literature, the joint contribution of both thinkers to an event-oriented reshaping of human identity.

Keywords affective event; Calvino, Italo; discursive event; identity transformation; Richir, Marc; Ricoeur, Paul; reading

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this text is to demonstrate, by means of selected examples, the dual operativity of the category of *event* within contemporary phenomenological and hermeneutical thought, albeit at the cost of its concretization. First, it will be necessary to briefly sketch the genesis and context of the use of this category within the aforementioned philosophical current, where one speaks of events in a manner distinct from that of occurrences within the analytic tradition. Second, the category of *event* will be situated against the broader backdrop of two contrasting philosophical positions: Marc Richir's transcendental phenomenology and Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology. The choice of precisely these authors and their views is not accidental. Both elaborate important anthropological projects in which reference to human faculties related to the domain of aesthetics played a decisive role. Richir, in this regard, draws upon phenomenological analyses of *phantasia* (Richir 2000, 61–182; 2004), whereas for Ricoeur the imagination is of paramount significance (Ricoeur 1991, 168–87; Amalric 2013). Moreover, both thinkers decisively engage in their reflections with Immanuel Kant's third Critique (the *Critique of Judgment*) (Richir and Carlson 2015, 79–92; Ricoeur 1998, 180), thereby creatively developing the insights of the Königsberg-based philosopher. As will become evident, each of them also proposes compelling theoretical accounts of the act of reading literature (more precisely, the novel) and of its significance for human identity.

Accordingly, the category of *event* will first be applied to the act of reading itself in both perspectives, to its unfolding and to the description of what transpires therein according to each of the selected thinkers. Subsequently, in terms of the *event*, we shall describe the effects that the accomplished act of reading exerts upon the reader in the light of both theories. This final moment—the consequences of reading upon the reader and his or her world—will be exemplified by the reading of a specific text: namely, two selected short stories by Italo Calvino from the collection *Difficult Loves*. All the stories in this volume include in their titles a reference to someone's "adventure": that of the traveler, the reader, the poet, and so forth. Yet more than to these various figures, the narrated "adventures" pertain to the play of gazes or of touch and their inherent polysemy (Wasilewska 2022). As such, they appear particularly susceptible to a twofold reading, inspired respectively by the perspectives of Richir and Ricoeur.

The Concept of *Event*: A Glimpse

As is well known, the category of *event*, in its contemporary continental elaborations, has a Heideggerian provenance. It was, however, the author of *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)* (*Contributions to Philosophy [Of the Event]*) who, already in the very title of this work, employed the term *Ereignis*, which he further specifies in the following manner: "beings are brought into their *constancy* through the *downgoing* of those who ground the truth of beyng. Beyng itself requires this. It needs those who go down and has already *appropriated* them, assigned them to itself, wherever beings appear. That is the essential occurrence of beyng itself; we call this essential occurrence the *event*" (Heidegger 2012, 8). And further: "Beyng essentially occurs as the event" (ibid., 25). The *event* here signifies the very destiny of Being, its coming into unconcealment, its phenomenological concretization as though "of its own accord." As such, it is originary, novel, and each time unique, unrepeatable. It comes forth or enters into manifestation not as conditioned by anything external, but rather as its own source or cause. It constitutes a gratuitous self-donation which, in its arrival or appearance, ruptures temporal continuity, insofar as it is unexpected, unheard of, and resistant to logical or systematic interpretation. Instead, the *event* itself opens new fields of possibility, and thus, for its recipient, provokes shock, wonder, and astonishment, since it disturbs the familiar order of things and exceeds every expectation as well as all that is recognizable (Gilbert 2020, 285–313). In terms of temporalization, it could be compared to the ever-renewed effusion of primal impression that establishes the originary point of the living present in Husserl's analyses of inner time-consciousness (Husserl 1989, 44–47), with the paradigmatic example being the fact of birth.

Among the thinkers who have developed the concept of the *event*—setting aside the manifold differences and significant nuances—one must certainly mention, in addition to Heidegger himself, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Marion, and Claude Romano. The latter, in particular, distinguishes between the *event* in its proper sense, briefly characterized here (*événemential*—for instance, mourning, encounter, illness), and so-called "intra-worldly" facts (*événementiel*—for example, rainfall, lightning, daybreak). Both are impersonal; yet while the former personally engages its addressee or participant, the latter do not, exhibiting instead the impossibility of unambiguously assigning them a subject (in that they happen to an open plurality of beings—Romano 2009, 23–31). The foregoing provisional list should undoubtedly be supplemented with at least the names of Henri Maldiney, Renaud Barbaras, Alain Badiou and Marc Richir (Prášek 2021, 59–60).

Even the foregoing, admittedly rather economical observations, allow us to surmise that within the traditions under examination the *event* is conceived in a manner quite different from its understanding in analytic philosophy, where the corresponding term designates that which either takes place or does not, occurs or fails to occur. At times it is equated with a kind of repeatable, or potentially repeatable, state of affairs; at other times it is construed as a particular—i.e., a contingent, datable, and localizable exemplification of a property. Such a momentary exemplification, according to some (J. Kim), exhibits a certain internal structure, while for others (D. Davidson) it is devoid of such structure and thus susceptible to multiple descriptions (Loux and Crisp 2017, 143–46).

What distinguishes the category of the *event* in the approaches that will be developed below is its capacity to open up a new horizon in its concreteness and singularity—an aspect that requires, on the one hand, a phenomenological perspective and, on the other, a hermeneutical one. In Richir's case, the event is defined primarily as the creation or formation of meaning (*Sinnbildung*—Richir 2000, 21–22; Schnell 2011, 69), whereas for Ricoeur it is above all discourse (Ricoeur 2016, 94–98, 107–08), which entitles us in this latter case to speak of a "discursive event." Richir emphasizes the evental character of meaning-formation by pointing to its instability ("flickering") in the register that precedes symbolic institution, while Ricoeur underscores the dialectical structure of discourse, in which the evental aspect is bound to the semantic one (stabilizing the momentariness of the event within the symbolic order). Such constitution, in turn, generates the necessity of interpretative pluralism. It therefore appears that the two positions under further consideration are not radically opposed, but rather that their complementary treatment may prove fruitful. Moreover, by introducing a distinction between contextual-evental understanding and an understanding that transcends given horizons of meaning, Romano suggests that the truly original work of art provides a paradigmatic example of such an event:

> A work of art cannot be understood within the artistic context in which it is born, which it necessarily transcends if it is an original work. In this respect, every interpretation of an event must draw on interpretative possibilities in the event itself: an event alone provides the key for its own deciphering. (Romano 2009, 62)

Let us now turn more closely to both approaches in their fundamental presuppositions, and in relation to the act of reading literature.

The Transcendental Phenomenology of Marc Richir, and the Act of Reading

Marc Richir's transcendental project of phenomenology assigns a pivotal role to *phantasia*[1] (*Phantasie*), carefully distinguished from imagination (*Einbildung*). At this point, the Belgian philosopher explicitly draws upon Husserl's distinctions regarding image-consciousness (Husserl 2005, 1–200), as well as upon Kant's transcendental schematism as presented in the first part of the third Critique (Richir and Carlson 2015, 80–91; Kant 2002, 103–04, 149–58). The significance of this differentiation becomes apparent once one considers Richir's radical methodological move, namely the hyperbolic phenomenological reduction, which extends beyond Husserl's own versions of the reduction at all its levels. For, in Richir's account, the reduction excludes not only the moment of ontological positing of the investigated structures, but also encompasses the very intentional and eidetic structures themselves, thereby radicalizing Husserl's determinations concerning "the retaining-in-grasp of the entire multiplicity of variations as the foundation of essential seeing" (Husserl 1973, §87c, 342). In this way, Richir seeks to reach a domain of inquiry more primordial than the symbolic and ontological orders.

In doing so, the Belgian phenomenologist makes extensive use of Kant. Beginning from the basic conception of transcendental schematism, Richir criticizes its conceptual and determining version from the *Critique of Pure Reason* as disappointing and unconvincing (Kant 1998, A137/B176–A147/B187, 271–77). For him, this version constitutes an unpresentable mediating presentation: an a priori mechanism—a "third term"—which orders the sensible manifold through the categories and thereby makes possible the constitution of scientific objects as such. As such, this determining version of transcendental schematism does not bear a phenomenological character. In the third Critique, by contrast, Kant speaks of another kind of schemata—reflective schemata—that the intellect draws from the imagination (sic!) in order to apprehend the aesthetic object, creatively gathering impressions. Here, thus, emerges the concept of reflection without concept, which Richir regards as "genial." On this basis, he develops his own account of schematism, now phenomenological, as a transcendental rhythm, a "music without sound" (Richir and Carlson 2015, 82–83).

It is precisely at this point that the particular role of *phantasia*, as distinguished from imagination, comes into play. For according to Richir,

1. The author deliberately preserves the Greek term, deeming its modern renderings inadequate on account of the semantic shifts introduced within the tradition.

phenomenological schematism is unpresentable, yet it articulates phenomena in their dispersion and overlapping (in their primordial phenomenalization)—which, from the perspective of reduced experience, does not occur in time or space. Rather, this schematism has a proto-temporal character, as if temporalizing and spatializing what phenomenalizes within the primordial and likewise unpresentable *chôra* (a concept Richir borrows from Plato's *Timaeus*: 48e–52e, which may be rendered as an originary "receptacle"; Stróżewski 2021, 305). In other words, it enables "the shadows of nothing" (phenomena as shadows deprived of internal consistency, or, as Richir also puts it, as mere phenomena) to relate to one another in dispersions, condensations, and explosions. The non-intentional register of primitive (*sauvages*) essences does not constitute pure chaos; rather, it organizes itself according to a specific rhythm—the phenomenological schematism—which manifests itself as a flickering: a dynamism of oscillation between appearing and disappearing. What sets these primitive essences into motion, however, is affectivity, which originally constitutes a dimension of absolute inwardness, yet displays an activity akin to a blind, anonymous motor (Richir and Carlson 2015, 164–65, 171–76).

For Richir, this primordial register of phenomenalization—that is, phenomenological schematism—constitutes precisely the domain of non-intentional *phantasia*, whose significance, in his view, surpasses that of intentional imagination. To better grasp this position, it is worth bearing in mind such examples as the process of humanization in the sense given by Donald W. Winnicott,[2] the sudden dazzling thought that comes to mind, or the emotional absorption induced by the reading of a fascinating novel (Richir and Carlson 2015, 238–42; Richir 2007). *Phantasia* represents for Richir the most archaic form of phenomenalization, whose transposition into the order of symbolic institution (language), and simultaneously into the domain of ontology and its simulacra (sign-substitutes of reality), only occurs through acts of intentional imagination. He conceives of "pure *phantasia*" as strictly intertwined with affectivity: we encounter it when the phenomenological concreteness of primitive essences is stirred by affectivity within the realm of lived corporeality or intercorporeality (*Leiblichkeit*),

2. The matter finds its clearest articulation in the author's own words: "I am proposing that there is a stage in the development of human beings that comes before objectivity and perceptibility. At the theoretical beginning a baby can be said to live in a subjective or conceptual world. The change from the primary state to one in which objective perception is possible is not only a matter of inherent or inherited growth process; it needs in addition an environmental minimum. It belongs to the whole vast theme of the individual travelling from dependence towards independence" (Winnicott 1984, 151).

but without this experience being counterbalanced by its object-side (as *Leibkörper*). And yet, already here a preliminary distinction between interiority and exteriority becomes possible, for "perceptive *phantasia*" in turn allows the phenomenological field to transcend itself toward alterity.

This primordial phenomenological field denotes, in fact, a multiplicity of living "absolute Heres" that, not yet situated in objective space nor mediated by it, unfold a primordial "receptor" (*chôra*), opening proto-space. At the same time, this originary spatial dissemination is accompanied by an equally originary temporalization, which consists, as it were, in a kind of perceiving:

> "Perceptive" *phantasia* is in fact a concreteness of language, as if the *phantasiai* were "perceiving" one another. And this is indeed what occurs: when one thinks, one "perceives" in *phantasia* what is still to come (a protention of language) in the temporalization of sense, just as one "perceives," in the same manner, what has already come (a retention of language) in the same temporalization—but this without any assignable present: what has been thought has meaning only in relation to what is still to be thought. There is thus already a gaze, but a gaze of the invisible within and upon the invisible. In other words, for me, the "perceptive" *phantasia par excellence* is the gaze that "sees" the unfigurable living "behind" the figured: and it is the extraordinary power of language to hold itself together in pro- and retro-"perception," this power whereby it is capable of reflecting itself and thus of gazing upon itself, but from within, with a kind of distance vis-à-vis sense in its search for itself. (Richir and Carlson 2015, 175)

In this manner, the originary multiplicity of "absolute Heres," simultaneously "perceiving" and being "perceived," realizes a reciprocal "empathy" (*Einfühlung*) within the proto-spatial sphere of transcendental inter-facticity (*Zwischenleiblichkeit*). This means that each living body (*Leib*) is at once an actual and irreducible bearer and recipient of gazes—not in the sensory sense, but precisely in the sense of phantasiatic "perceiving"—gazes both actual and virtual. In this sense, it is not only a living tissue of corporeality, but also phantasized corporeality (*Phantasieleib*—Richir and Carlson 2015, 240–41; Richir 2006, 36–38). Empathy, moreover, functions as follows:

> It is not that I somehow "leave behind" my lived body (*Leib*) as my absolute Here, but rather that, in glimpsing the other lived body (*Leib*) and its absolute Here which is over there, it is as if I were there myself. I am therefore not "really" (*reell*) there with my lived experiences, for I cannot, so to speak,

> leave my lived body (and my absolute Here) "behind me." And yet I am there nonetheless as if, that is to say, not *ipso facto* through intuitive representation in imagination (for in that case the other would be nothing but a "projection" of my lived experiences into its interiority, a mere imaginary duplication of myself). What is at issue is an intuitive representation that seems to be induced by the as if which, in Husserl, generally signals the modification through imagination—but here, for us, by the mobilization of *phantasia*, which must be carefully distinguished from imagination. This, first of all, insofar as it is not from the outset a figuration of an intentional object. Or, insofar as . . . the intentionality of *phantasia* is not, originally, an object-intentionality, but rather, as we have implied, a *spatializing* "intentionality." (Richir 2006, 37)

This new phenomenological approach of Richir—outlined here only schematically and in its essential contours—has given rise to an intriguing conception of the act of reading literature (Richir 2003, 24–26; 2011, 15–24). At this point, as well, the thinker emphasizes a significant phenomenological distinction between imagination (*Einbildung*) and *phantasia* (*Phantasie*). Imagination, referring to the concept of "image," has historically generated much ambiguity, intensified by the contemporary dominance of audiovisual technologies. Husserl posits that imagination is an intentional act that aims at an object. This object is endowed with an intentional sense, but it is not present "in flesh and blood" like a perceived object. This object (called *Bildsujet*) is nevertheless present in the act of aiming itself, but as unreal. It is quasi-posited as present by and in the act of imagining, rather than posited as actually present. Two cases may occur: either the object is quasi-posited through an "image" (*Bildobjekt*) that has a physical support, such as, for example, a photograph, or the object is quasi-posited through an "image" that lacks a kind of physical support. In the latter example, without any physical support, when one imagines something, one aims at it and "sees it in the mind," not its "image." The proof is, for example, that some details are not countable in imagination, which would be possible if one perceived the object directly. Then, the "image" cannot be considered to be an imperfect reproduction of reality; rather, it is an unreality that fundamentally eludes us, yet paradoxically serves as a figuration (*Darstellung*) of the intentional object. Richir adds that the fidelity of the figuration to the perceptual original is of little importance; the essence of the act of imagining lies in its intentionality towards the object, and the intuitive figuration of this object is not what is properly aimed at. Figuration is never posited for its own sake, but mediates a positing or a quasi-positing. It is a "perceptive semblance," a perception distinct from intentional aiming or passive (sensual)

reception. Richir explains that without the imaginative intentionality of the object, the physical support would be reduced—for example, in the case of a picture—to a collection of spots. The physical support is thus merely a support, and the intuitive figuration of the object acts as a simulacrum between the subject of the imaginative act and its object. A character is not present in their portrait, nor a landscape in its photograph; they are present in the intentional act of imagining (as noematic correlates), but they are not there, in presence, in the world.

Conversely, *phantasia* emerges and vanishes in flashes (*blitzhaft*), intermittently and discontinuously; it is protean and, crucially, non-present. Richir draws consequences from this, stating that *phantasia* does not fall under a classical (Husserlian) temporalization into presents equipped with their protentions and retentions, but rather under a different type of temporalization in presence, without an assignable present. Furthermore, its protean character renders it non-figurative of (intentional) objects, making it nebulous, internally mutable, more or less intense, and thus simultaneously non-positional (in that it is not posited by an Ego and does not posit an object) and non-intentional (in the classical sense), it being unable by itself to mediate the positing of any object.

The fact that some of these characteristics also appear in intuitive figuration within imagination suggests, according to Richir, that the act of imagination is instituted on the phenomenological basis of *phantasia*, through a kind of immobilization of temporalization in presence. *Phantasia* is transposed in the (intentional) act of imagining in the form of a "perceptive semblance," which is the semblance of the object intentionally aimed at by the act of imagining. This explains, for instance, why a dream is always a mixture of nebulous *phantasiai* that have remained in their original phenomenological status, and (intentional) imaginations in which one recognizes a particular place, character, or action. The intentionality "projected" onto *phantasia* transmutes it into a "perceptive semblance" that functions as the simulacrum of the quasi-presentation of an object (e.g. an animal seen in a cloud). This intimate, though often hidden, connection between *phantasia* and imagination also explains the fundamental instability of intuitive figuration in imagination. By contrast, the attempts to fix this instability can even destroy the vivacity of *phantasia* and impoverish it to the level of stereotypes.

Richir's theory of reading is elaborated against the background formed by the paradox of theater (Richir 2003, 27–29; 2011, 25–32). As Husserl observed, on stage, the character, like Richard III, for instance, "is" present, though not (sensually) perceived "in flesh and blood." What is perceived

is the actor, the stage, the scenery. A good actor does not provide an intuitive figuration of an intentionally aimed object; if the actor is good, the character they embody is alive. The magic of theater lies in unfolding an intrigue among living characters. If the actor is poor, the spectator is forced to imagine the character, leading to boredom or the projection of their own phantasms. The paradox of theater is that the actor "lends" their entire living body (*Leib*) to the living body of the character they embody, without any intuitive figuration of that character in imagination. The character is in presence, within the temporalizing flow of the intrigue, but never truly present in an intentional act of imagination. If well "embodied" by the actor, the character is not present in an act of perception or imagination; it is in presence, intuitively non-figurable, in *phantasia*. And if it is there, in presence but not present, it is nevertheless the "object" of a "perception" in a different phenomenological sense, through *phantasia* itself. The "perceptive" *phantasia* in question differs from any sensual perception. In this case, it is a "perception" not of unreality or reality, but of a "consistency" or "concreteness" (*Sachlichkeit*) belonging to the character, which is indeed there, in presence, but outside of any assignable present. Thus, theater is effective if it engages *phantasia*, but degenerates if it appeals to acts of imagination. While imagination only ever aims at imaginary objects, "perceptive" *phantasia* opens up to a "concreteness" whose internal horizon is reality, even if that reality never existed. This "consistency" is in infinite transition (it being a kind of transitional object in a sense echoing that of Winnicott) between "pure" *phantasia* and reality, in a free play of *phantasia*, which explains the many possible interpretations of theatrical characters. A good actor achieves empathy (*Einfühlung*) for the character through non-positional and non-figurative *phantasia*. It is through the actor's "perceptive" *phantasiai* that they pass into the spectators' *phantasiai*, revealing "perceptive" *phantasia* as the most archaic basis of intersubjective encounter.

In literature, the case is analogous (Richir 2003, 29–33). The novel, like theater, is a temporal unfolding of an intrigue among living characters, but without the necessity of being embodied by actors. Any intuitive figuration of these characters (e.g., in film adaptations) is immediately disappointing, because no actor, however talented, can convey the complexity of the character as it imposed itself on the novelist and as it imposes itself on the attentive reader. Like in theater, the key in literature is the experience of "living" characters. Both art forms combat the threat posed by imagination, understood as a drive for detailed, fixed figuration that invalidates vivacity. When literary experience is effective, it engages "perceptive"

phantasia rather than acts of imagination. Temporality occurs in presence without an assignable present. Thus, characters attain a "concreteness" that is in presence but not in the present, and has reality as its horizon. Both the writer and the reader (analogous to the actor and spectator) undergo a process of empathetical involvement (*Einfühlung*) with the character. The intrinsic life and affectivity of characters are intuitively non-figurable, but "perceptively" apprehended through *phantasia.* In literature, there is no physical embodiment of the character; any visual adaptations are inherently disappointing, because an actor can never capture the complexity of a novel's character. The novel's freedom from theatrical conventions grants "perceptive" *phantasia* a significantly greater freedom in the novel than in the theater. The novelist "interprets" their characters in the course of writing; they do not invent them from scratch. Characters become alive as they begin to live their own lives, which the writer must follow and develop amidst the infinite, indeterminate possibilities of *phantasia.* Unlike in theater, where the actor's "perceptive" *phantasiai* are transmitted to the spectators, in literature it is the novelist's art, contained in the text, that awakens "perceptive" *phantasiai* in the reader.

When we read a novel (well), we imagine only in ephemeral and fleeting moments. By contrast, the essence of our activity as a reader lies paradoxically in both the concern for understanding the text and in the activity of *phantasia.* Crucial are the intrinsic lives of the characters, meaning the "movements of the soul" or "labyrinths of affectivity" (Richir 2003, 31), where affections are intimately linked to *phantasiai* and "perceptive" *phantasiai*, and these movements are grasped "live." This is why the role of the reader turns out to be quite particular. The reader must experience empathy for the concrete life of the characters—meaning achieving their "perception" in *phantasia.* This requires time—the time of temporalization in presence, without an assignable present. If the reader maintains integrity towards the reading and the writer, they will be incapable of creating a physical portrait of characters, and any proposed portrait will seem false, or even horrifying in its poverty. Many indeterminacies are needed for *phantasia* to be able to live, somewhat like in a dream. Hence, the reader should avoid the "traps of imagination" (Richir 2003, 32)—especially overly meticulous descriptions, which destroy phenomenological vivacity and lead to boredom. A sensitive and intelligent reader can feel and understand these plays in a non-positional manner: i.e., without positing them in reality. For the above reasons, the text should not contain overly detailed descriptions of places or characters, as these appeal to imagination rather than *phantasia*, disallowing "phenomenological vivacity." Rather, through its indeterminacies, the text creates space

for the reader's *phantasia* to freely operate and animate the characters and the depicted world. The text becomes a vehicle for "perceptive" *phantasiai* that awaken "life" in the reader. Thus, Richir corrects the definition of the novel, stating that beyond the romantic intrigue, what matters is the intrinsic life of the characters, which makes the story aesthetically interesting. The text, rather than being a document or testimony, allows us to "feel" the depicted world in *phantasia* better than a history handbook. Such an interest in the extreme lability and fluidity of affections, and how they can shift from one modulation to another, as well as in the reader's experience of the "life" of characters by means of empathy and "perceptive" *phantasiai*, qualifies the *mimesis* that is at work here as non-reflective, active and internal. This is why, in the case of reading, as the act is viewed by Richir, we have to do with an affective event:

> One grasps an intimacy not truly at a distance, but in the *chôra*, in another seat, anterior to extension, to space. This can, moreover, be verified when one reads literature: in reading Stendhal, for example, one indeed seizes upon something of Stendhal himself, in his singularity. And yet one can never gain access to the man as he was: that belongs to the domain of intersubjectivity, but it is lost forever—even if one may look upon portraits. (Richir and Carlson 2015, 242)

Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Its Account of Reading

Quite differently, in Ricoeur we have to do with a stance that could be characterized, in Richirian terms, as transposition into the order of symbolic institution. Actually, in his philosophy, Ricoeur makes a crucial distinction between the epistemological and ontological functions of the life-world (*Lebenswelt*—Ricoeur 2004a, 371–77). This distinction highlights the difference between the validation and obligatory character of scientific ideas on the one hand, and the ultimate referent of all scientific and cultural idealizations on the other. In the epistemological order, the idea of science takes precedence, yet the ontological priority of the *Lebenswelt*, as the ultimate referent of all utterances, undermines consciousness's claim to absolute authority over the universe of meanings. The separation of these two aspects of the *Lebenswelt* helps to recognize the twofold belonging of humans: to the *Lebenswelt* (given prior to the question of obligation) and to the world of symbols and rules, which forms an interpretative framework for the former, giving meaning to the practical, situational human condition. This twofold belonging entails, in Ricoeur's view, valuing interpretation

over descriptive accounts of immediate data. Since interpretation becomes unavoidable due to the insurmountable distance that language establishes from what it expresses. The reflective use of language implies an irreversible departure from immediacy, and the universe of signs and logic becomes the domain of validity.

Ricoeur's philosophical project, deeply rooted in the philosophy of reflection, existentialism, phenomenology and hermeneutics, posits that self-understanding is progressively mediated by texts. This ongoing process, framed by a "hermeneutic circle," begins with a non-critical self-understanding, moves through a critique involving objectifications, and culminates in a more critical and enriched self-understanding, often summarized as "more explanation for better understanding" (Ricoeur 2016, 94–126, 159–83). One of the pivotal concepts permeating this thought is that of discourse. Ricoeur defines discourse as a meaningful event belonging to the sphere of social communication, inherently involving the dynamic: "someone says something to someone about something" (2016, 101). This comprehensive definition integrates all constitutive elements of linguistic communication, including sender, receiver, medium, code, message and context. His work navigates the complexities of meaning and addresses interpretive conflicts through hermeneutical reflection.

Discourse unfolds through an internal dialectic of event and meaning, where the ephemeral utterance is reidentified as stable meaning, possessing both sense (its objective aspect) and reference (its connection to an extra-linguistic world). Thus, "if all discourse is realised as an event, all discourse is understood as meaning" (Ricoeur 2016, 96). Furthermore, writing is considered the full manifestation of discourse, introducing distanciation. This includes the meaning surpassing the event of saying, emancipation from the author's intention and original audience, and emancipation from ostensive reference, opening up the "world" of the text (Ricoeur 2016, 94–105).

These forms of distanciation are central to Ricoeur's understanding of semantic innovation, particularly in poetic discourse, where metaphor, by suspending literal meaning, projects new possibilities of seeing and being in the world, serving as a heuristic fiction that "redescribes reality" (Ricoeur 2016, 54, 104, 236, 256). This framework extends to narrative discourse, encompassing both historical and fictional narratives, which Ricoeur views as dependent on emplotment for organizing events into meaningful wholes. These observations lead us directly to his conception of the threefold *mimesis*.

As it has already been stated, Ricoeur's philosophy fundamentally posits that self-understanding is progressively mediated by texts, a process framed

by a "hermeneutic circle" moving from non-critical self-understanding through textual objectifications to a richer, critical self-understanding. This profound engagement with language, time and human experience is articulated through his theory of threefold *mimesis*, which is central to his understanding of the act of reading literature. Ricoeur articulates the mediation between time and narrative through three interconnected moments of *mimesis*: prefiguration (*mimesis* 1), configuration (*mimesis* 2), and refiguration (*mimesis* 3), with the moment of emplotment (configuration) constituting the pivot of this analysis (Ricoeur 1984, 52–87).

The initial stage of prefiguration refers to the pre-understanding of the world of action. This means that the composition of a plot is grounded in a prior familiarity with human acting, its meaningful structures, symbolic resources, and temporal character. These features are described rather than deduced, emphasizing that "to imitate or represent action is first to pre-understand what human acting is" (Ricoeur 1984, 64). This pre-understanding, common to both poets and their readers, is crucial, for although literature "institutes a break," it would be "incomprehensible if it did not give a configuration to what was already a figure in human action" (ibid.).

The moment of configuration or emplotment is the "kingdom of the as if" (ibid.), the realm of narrative composition where emplotment (*muthos*) takes center stage. As the pivot of the analysis, configuration is the rule-governed composition of a tale. The plot's primary function is to "grasp together" and integrate into "one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events, thereby schematizing the intelligible signification attached to the narrative taken as a whole" (Ricoeur 1984, x). This process creates a "synthesis of the heterogeneous," achieving a "discordant concordance" (Ricoeur 1984, 66, 69–70) by bringing together diverse elements such as circumstances, goals, means, interactions and results. Ricoeur explicitly compares this configuring act to Kant's productive imagination and schematism, understanding it not as a psychological faculty but as a transcendental one that engenders a "mixed intelligibility" (1984, 68) between a story's themes and its intuitive presentation of events. Ricoeur extends the notion of an imitated action to novels oriented toward character or toward an idea, and applies the model of emplotment analogously to historical narrative through concepts like quasi-plot, quasi-character and quasi-event (1984, 181–225). Thus emplotment serves a crucial mediating function, operating within its own textual field to integrate and mediate between the pre-understanding characterizing the moment of prefiguration and the subsequent refiguration. It is here that the "literariness" of the work of literature is instituted, as the creative imitation produces "quasi-things" and invents the "as-if."

The third moment of *mimesis*, termed refiguration or application, represents the return from the world of the text to the reader's world, where the narrative configuration is applied to real-life experience. The act of reading is the "operator" that links refiguration to configuration, and it is in this act that the work acquires a meaning in the full sense of the term, at the intersection of the world projected by the text and the life-world of the reader. The text, by suspending the reference of ordinary language and deploying "poetic reference," effects a "redescription of reality" and "augments it with meanings." It thereby unfolds a "world in front of itself," which the reader can inhabit and project their "ownmost powers" into (Ricoeur 1984, 80–81). This textual world is "the whole set of references opened by every sort of descriptive or poetic text . . . read, interpreted, and 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*)" (Ricoeur 1984, 80). Reading involves appropriation, a terminal act of self-understanding where the reader makes one's own what was initially alien. This is not a passive reception but a creative act that expands the reader's horizon of existence. Ricoeur emphasizes the dynamic interplay between the reader's historico-cultural context and the text, leading to a "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer) and the generation of new questions. Reading, especially fictional narratives, offers "imaginative variations" (Husserl) on time, enabling the exploration of nonlinear features of phenomenological time that historical time might obscure. This refiguration can have a cathartic effect, transforming negative emotions into pleasure and enabling new evaluations of reality, thereby providing an impetus to action. Ultimately, this process leads to the formation of narrative identity, where the self is dynamically reshaped by cultural narratives and its own life-story. The moment of application, therefore, makes explicit the "interweaving reference" between history and fiction in the refiguration of human time, ultimately revealing and transforming human action (Ricoeur 1984, 76–87).

The transformation in question becomes possible by means of certain writing and textual strategies, as well as through the reader's response to them. These three moments might be referred to as, respectively, the rhetoric of fiction, poetics, and the phenomenological and hermeneutical aesthetic of reading (Ricoeur 1988, 160–79).

The first moment focuses on the author's techniques aimed at persuading the reader and creating an "intensity of the illusion" (Ricoeur 1988, 161). Rhetoric of fiction distinguishes between the real author (the biographical figure) and the implied author (the "second self" projected within the

work). The implied author takes the initiative in the "show of strength" that governs the relationship between writing and reading, employing persuasive strategies to impose a fictional world upon the reader. This includes techniques like "showing" rather than "telling" and establishing a reliable narrator. Even when history is read as a novel, the fiction-effect lowers the reader's guard, suspending mistrust and establishing confidence, thereby facilitating the "reenact[ment]" or "rethink[ing]" of situations and trains of thought by giving them "vividness" (Ricoeur 1988, 186). The "dramatization" of the narrator, in turn, introduces "credibility," which functions analogously to documentary evidence in historiography. An unreliable narrator can serve an ethical function, calling the reader to freedom and responsibility by challenging them to decipher the unreliability.

The stage of poetics or textual configuration concerns the inscription of the author's strategy within the literary configuration of the text itself. For Ricoeur, drawing on Roman Ingarden, a text is inherently incomplete, offering "schematic views" and "places of indeterminacy" that require the reader's active "concretization." Wolfgang Iser further developed this idea with the concept of the "wandering viewpoint," which acknowledges that the text's totality is never perceived at once and that reading is a journey through the text. This involves a continuous interplay between modified expectations (protentions) and transformed memories (retentions) (Ricoeur 1988, 167–69). Literary texts "depragmatize" objects, transforming them rather than merely denoting them, which allows them to offer new perspectives on reality. Reading, in this sense, is not passive reception but a "creative act replying to the poetic act that founded the work" (Ricoeur 1988, 320, n. 58). Moreover, temporalization procedures employed in narrative involve the relationship between the act of enunciating and the uttered statement, and their connection to the non-fictional time of life and action. Meaning is created through the divergence and mutual shifts of the time needed for narration and the time of the narrated things. The actual refiguration of human temporal experience is the work of the combined intentionalities of historical and fictional narratives. Historical intentionality, aiming to grasp the past "as it really was" (Ricoeur 1988, 207), cannot do so without an imaginative component. This imagination simulates seeing, making the past appear as "what I would have seen, what I would have witnessed if I had been there" (Ricoeur 1988, 185). Fictional intentionality becomes "historicized" by adhering to rules of "probability or necessity" in plot construction, making its unreal events "past facts for the narrative voice" (Ricoeur 1988, 190). This crossing of intentionalities happens in reading, creating an imaginative figuration of a certain state of affairs.

The act of reading involves a moment of *stasis*, where the reader immerses himself or herself in the fictional world, "un-realizing" themselves to the extent of the unreality of the fictional world they enter. This immersion facilitates the subsequent refiguration of their own experience. Ricoeur suggests that "the more readers become unreal in their reading, the more profound and far-reaching will be the work's influence on social reality" (1988, 179). This refiguration involves a profound transformation of the reader. The cathartic moment of application frees the reader from everyday experience, enabling a clarifying understanding that empowers them to make new evaluations of their own reality. This emotional-cognitive transposition of meaning allows the reader to re-evaluate their own world in light of the poetic vision. The dialectic of refiguration manifests itself in the tension between the freedom of imaginative variations and the author's persuasive strategies, between identity and difference, and between referentiality and communicability. While the implied author projects a world and guides interpretation through rhetorical strategies, the reader actively actualizes the text's meaning. This involves a "dispossession" of the reader's immediate ego, leading to a self-understanding reshaped by the text's revelatory power. There is an asymmetry where the real author is effaced in the implied author, but the real reader embodies the textual suggestions and concretizes the implied reader (Ricoeur 1988, 170–71). The act of reading is not solitary: it is deeply embedded in a community of readers. Indeed, the community establishes norms and canons, framing the textual world beyond purely subjective interpretation. The ideal outcome is a "fusion of horizons" that results in an analogous relationship between the textual world and the reader's life, providing a new *impetus* for action (Ricoeur 1988, 179, 247).

The above findings clearly establish that, for Ricoeur, unlike in Richir, imagination is essential for "concretizing" characters and events and for imaginative variations on time. While fiction offers freedom of imaginative variations, this freedom is internally constrained by the author's implied vision, creating a force of conviction. Consequently, the effect of *catharsis* is not just emotional cleansing but "clarification," leading to new assessments of reality. Thus, in Ricoeur's conception of the act of reading and of the mimetic and cathartic processes intertwined with it—processes more cognitive than merely affective—we are, in essence, confronted with an event that merits the designation of "discursive."

Two Readings of Two "Adventures" by Italo Calvino

In the final part of the present study, we shall briefly relate both theories of reading to two short stories by Italo Calvino, contained in the collection

Difficult Loves (Calvino 2017), in order to examine the complementarity of these philosophical approaches when applied. The collection *Difficult Loves* is one of particular interest since it presents a notable articulation of the author's "fascination with the empire of the senses" and the "materiality of expression" (Cavallaro 2010, 14). The stories in this collection often highlight the "ineradicable absurdity haunting humanity's feeble attempts at communication" and "people's perverse proclivity to erect barriers, both consciously and unconsciously, against the possibility of embarking on forms of emotional exchange that could alter their lives radically and thus alleviate their daily exposure to loneliness and tedium" (Cavallaro 2010, 191). The "adventure" in the titles frequently points to internal processes of recognition, the shattering of illusions, and confrontations with one's own reality, rather than external heroic deeds. Let us turn our gaze more attentively to two narratives drawn from the aforementioned collection.

In "The Adventure of a Traveler" (Calvino 2017, 77–96), Federico V., a diligent man from northern Italy, frequently travels by night train to Rome to meet Cinzia U., his beloved. During his journey, he meticulously plans their future conversations and relishes the anticipation of their intimacy, considering the pillow he buys as a "daily letter to Cinzia" (Calvino 2017, 81). He deliberately ignores other passengers, like a salesman, to immerse himself in his romantic fantasies, humming French love songs. Later, his compartment is invaded by boisterous soldiers speaking an unintelligible dialect, with whom he surprisingly feels a sense of identification, perhaps to enhance his coming reunion with Cinzia. Upon arriving in Rome, he calls Cinzia, whose sleepy voice makes him realize the profound, incommunicable significance of his night's journey, which now fades with the "cruel explosion of day" (Calvino 2017, 96).

It seems that with this story we have to do with a deeply internal, almost entirely mental, "adventure," where the physical journey serves as a canvas for Federico's rich inner life and fervent anticipations. It is an "inner concentration" (Calvino 2017, 79) and a "travel in love," a "release of euphoria" that he feels "harmonized with the race of the train" (Calvino 2017, 84). The "adventure" is in the intense, subjective world Federico constructs, which ultimately proves untranslatable into external reality. The story highlights the gap between internal experience and outer reality, and the inherent difficulty in communicating profoundly personal feelings. Federico's rich inner world, filled with "loftier heavens" (Calvino 2017, 85), cannot be fully conveyed to Cinzia. This aligns with Calvino's broader concern about the "plague afflicting language" that "tends to level out all expression" and deaden "the spark that shoots out from the collision

of words and new circumstances" (Cavallaro 2010, 10). Federico's inability to recount "the significance of that night" (Calvino 2017, 96) mirrors this linguistic limitation, where the richness of his subjective experience is lost in the ordinariness of spoken words.

One might say that, from the perspective of affective life, of lived sensitivity, where we encounter the emergent sense of a nocturnal journey in the ceaseless interplay between Federico's inner world and external circumstances, Richir's theory of reading makes it possible to grasp the dynamism of empathy and the efficacy of immersion into the world of his experiences, so as to undergo something of them oneself. On the other hand, Calvino, through Federico's journey, questions the nature of "presence" and "absence." Federico's journey is a state of "vague anticipation of tomorrow" (Calvino 2017, 87), where the imagined presence of Cinzia is more vivid than any immediate physical reality. This also touches upon Calvino's "ongoing concern with the coexistence of absence and presence, invisibility and visibility, by intimating that the observable is at all time traversed by the imperceptible" (Cavallaro 2010, 130), suggesting that the true essence of Federico's love exists in this invisible, internal dimension. From the perspective of the games with time, which take into account the interplay between narrated time, the time of narrating, and the time of reading, as well as the effect of the historicization of fiction and the cognitive import of iconic augmentation, one can appreciate the complementary contribution of Ricoeur's theory of reading. Indeed, what we encounter here is a certain cognitive gain with regard to the character of the relation between Federico and Cinzia, insofar as it is lived by him.

In another story, "The Adventure of a Motorist" (Calvino 2017, 171–80), the anonymous narrator drives at high speed at night on the highway, heading towards "Y" (a woman), in city "B," from his home in "A." He questions his true desire—whether he wants to find her or for her to rush towards him. He also suspects his rival, "Z," might be on the same road, and perceives passing cars as potential signals from either of them. He fears that a direct meeting would lead to "communication that is already difficult on the telephone" becoming "even more obstructed, suffocated, buried as if under an avalanche of sand" (Calvino 2017, 176). He wishes to transform himself and his message into a "cone of light launched at a hundred and forty kilometers an hour" (ibid.), believing such a signal could be understood. After an unsuccessful phone call to Y, he joyfully assumes she is driving towards him, so he turns back, searching for her among the anonymous flashes of cars. He concludes that the "price to pay is high . . . not to be able to distinguish ourselves from the many signals that pass along this road, each with a meaning of its own

that remains hidden and indecipherable, because there is no longer anyone outside of here who is able to receive us and understand us" (Calvino 2017, 179–80). This "adventure" is a metaphorical quest for connection and love in a modern, technologically mediated, and fast-paced world. It is a quasi-philosophical reflection on the nature of identity and communication in an era where interactions are often reduced to anonymous "flashes." The "adventure" lies in the pursuit of an elusive, reciprocal signal, driven by hope and uncertainty, in a landscape of constant, impersonal movement. The story profoundly comments on the challenges of authentic connection and communication in contemporary society, where human interactions are often mediated and depersonalized by speed and technology. Individuals become like "beams of light," their identities blurred in a "digital noise."

Richir's account of the act of reading provides a conceptual framework within which it becomes possible to apprehend, in terms of "perceptive" *phantasia*, the motorist's desire to become a "cone of light"—perfectly encapsulating the transformation "in which individual subjectivities are transformed into the anonymous glimmers and luminous flashes," and where "the symbiotic relationship between body and automobile is conducive to a metamorphosis of the human into almost incorporeal, beaming and flickering effects" (Cavallaro 2010, 60–61). This highlights Calvino's interest in the "unstoppable metamorphosis" (Cavallaro 2010, 154) of narratives and identities. The driver's uncertainty about "Y" and "Z" makes them anonymous "flashes," reducing them to fragments within a system of fleeting signs. By contrast, according to the Ricoeurian conceptualization of reading, the story deals with the progressive narrative apprehension of the whole, an unceasing play with time enacted through anticipations and retrospections in the narrator's consciousness. Moreover, this interpretation resonates with Calvino's concern for the limitations of human discourse, where communication is "obstructed, suffocated, buried" (Calvino 2017, 176). This suggests a profound loneliness at the heart of modern connection, where even if a message is sent, there might be no one truly capable of receiving and understanding it, unless our solitude is transgressed by the wonder of communication:

> The incommunicable is the psychic as such, that is to say, that non-intentional dimension of life, that manner in which lived experience chains itself together with itself, that sequence of events transversally bound by time, that belonging of events to the same series, the same sphere, the same closure. The psychic, in a word, is the solitude of life, which at intervals is rescued by the miracle of discourse. (Ricoeur 2004b: 67)

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we may say that both philosophical conceptions of reading have proven their fertility and complementarity in concrete application. The non-figurative and non-reflective, yet active and internal *mimesis through empathy* appears to be more operative on the plane of affective life, of shifting moods and flashes of sensation at the threshold between inner and outer worlds, where the psyche enters into ceaseless interactions with its changing environment and circumstances. By contrast, the re-figurative *threefold mimesis*—narratively restructuring experience and enriching it cognitively—demonstrates its functionality on the level of discursive reconstruction of identity. Both are indispensable, for, as Prášek observes, on the one hand:

> The proper subjective dimension of the self—its identity—is constituted by the living body feeling itself from inside through "synaisthesis," a sort of unifying archaic kinesthesis. It is only thanks to this identity that the process of phenomenalization (events of sense) can sediment and form a personal or internal history—his or her ipseity in the sense of personal uniqueness. (2021, 76).

On the other hand, he states that "the concrete subjectivity, a person, is nothing but the result of this sedimentation finally modified through the symbolic institution into a 'personal story' one can narrate" (Prášek 2021, 76). In other words, a comprehensive account of identity, as well as of the experience of our freedom (Romano 2020, 50–58, 66–70), requires the cooperation of these two approaches, these two conceptions of mimetic processes. For not only is reading itself a play of belonging and distancing—where the former seems to be more adequately grasped by Richir, and the latter by Ricoeur—but a similar struggle, an oscillation between proximity and distance, also characterizes our identity-transformations and our lived experience of freedom. The problematic moment in Richir concerning distance and the critical verification of experience—its conformity with the textual schema—is aptly articulated by Ricoeur, while the Belgian phenomenologist, in turn, complements him with conceptualizations of the moment of affective belonging and of the motivational sources of subjective transformation. In this context, Calvino himself declared that his efforts were not "merely aimed at making a book but also at changing myself, the goal of all human endeavor" (Cavallaro 2010, 174–75). This conviction profoundly echoes the inner metamorphoses undergone by his characters in *Difficult Loves*.

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