

Introduction

An encounter simultaneously tangential, tendentious, and intangible begins to emerge but also slips away.

—Jacques Derrida, “The Word: Giving, Naming, Calling”

Any account of the contentious relation between Paul Ricoeur and Jacques Derrida cannot fail to be marked, initially at least, by a feeling of melancholy and a certain mournfulness. Not only because the two thinkers, having recently passed away within only a few months of each other, will not have the opportunity to contribute to or revisit the various debates in which they jointly participated for approximately fifty years. But also because, even when they were alive, most of their public encounters could be described, at best, as missed opportunities of a fruitful dialogue. Hence a sense of sorrowfulness with respect to the distance separating deconstruction and hermeneutics, those two most influential streams of contemporary European thought.

The first public instance of a miscarried dialogue was a roundtable discussion following a conference on “Communication” in Montreal in 1971, organized by The Association of the Society for Philosophy in the French Language.¹ Both Ricoeur and Derrida contributed formal presentations to the conference and actively participated in the roundtable discussion, which was dominated, to say the least, by an animated confrontation between them.² A debate between the two thinkers apparently did take place at the time. Considering, however, that the word *debate* implies the willingness of each partner in a conversation to resolve any initial disagreement by being open to what the other has to say, or, according to its Latin *etymon*, the reversal of an incipient discordance,³ it is clear that this exchange constituted, rather, a spirited altercation. And even though Derrida, on three or four occasions, begins responding by declaring that he agrees with Ricoeur, he hastens to temper and complicate this scene of agreement by adding another twist to his argument. Whether the dichotomy between semiology and semantics, the event of signature, or *differance* is at

issue, Ricoeur and Derrida seem to be talking at cross-purposes throughout this discussion. At certain points, the confrontation becomes so lively that the two interlocutors cannot help interrupting each other, thereby rendering the possibility of a patient dialogue very difficult indeed.

Nor is a series of publications that appeared in the seventies on metaphor a debate, as in none of the three texts of this exchange do they fully engage with each other's arguments. The first one, Derrida's "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy" (1971), is a "deconstructive" interpretation of the vicissitudes of metaphor in philosophical discourse and does not contain any reference to Ricoeur.⁴ It is the latter who instigates the polemic by providing, in the eighth study of *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language* (1975), a critical reading of Derrida's essay.⁵ In no way does that reading amount to a detailed response to Derrida. Ricoeur chooses to focus on two very specific aspects of "White Mythology," whose argument, moreover, he hastily assimilates to Heidegger's conviction that the metaphorical exists only within the limits of metaphysics, and to which he devotes just a few pages. Finally, "The *Retreat of Metaphor*" (1978) was supposed to be Derrida's rejoinder to Ricoeur's polemical comments.⁶ Yet, the explicit references to Ricoeur are limited to a few observations to the effect that he mistakenly attributed to Derrida assertions that "White Mythology" was specifically intended to put into question. Derrida goes on to devote the largest part of his essay to a meticulous examination of certain Heideggerian motifs. As a result, their debate on metaphor could also be portrayed as a failed attempt to engage in constructive dialogue.⁷

More recently, in his *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2000), Ricoeur affirmatively draws attention to Derrida's paradoxical formulation that forgiveness is impossible to the extent that one, in order genuinely to forgive, should forgive the unforgivable. Despite, however, his acknowledgment of an asymmetry between the act of forgiving and the demand to forgive the unforgivable, Ricoeur defines forgiveness, on the first page of his "Epilogue," entitled "Difficult Forgiveness," in terms of an infinite horizon or a task that may be *difficult* but not *impossible*.⁸ Derrida refers to this third instance of disagreement in his brief essay paying tribute to Ricoeur.⁹ He wonders about the difference between an impossible and a difficult forgiveness, and points out that at stake, in the final analysis, is the concept of the "self" and Ricoeur's insistence on determining selfhood on the basis of the "I can."¹⁰ *A contrario*, for Derrida, it is always the other, be that other myself, who decides, forgives, or acts, a structure that, introducing an absolutely irreducible alterity into the heart of the experience of forgiveness, renders problematic its construal as activity or possibility, even a difficult one.

Finally, the controversial issue of selfhood resurfaces in a discussion on the promise, in which both thinkers participated. On the one hand, Ricoeur's "La promesse d'avant la promesse" (2004) contains no reference to Derrida and

explicitly opposes the promise to betrayal and perjury. Invoking J. L Austin's and John R. Searle's speech acts theory, Ricoeur associates the promise with the self-constancy of a self that ought to keep the word given to the other within a horizon regulated by the Kantian Idea of a universal civil society.¹¹ On the other hand, Derrida distances himself from Ricoeur's reliance on the notion of the "self" and establishes an inextricable link between the promise and an originary pervertibility. The latter points to a certain otherness that cannot be subordinated to the authority of the self, to an ineluctable multiplicity that will always minimally contaminate the self-constancy and ethical responsibility that Ricoeur's "selfhood" prioritizes. Derrida underscores that both speech acts theory and hermeneutics cannot help acknowledging the inherence of this structural pervertibility in every act of promising, even if they strive to minimize its effects and significance.¹²

The sense of failure emanating from these four occasions is aggravated by their reluctance to confront directly or discuss in detail each other's philosophy. With the exception of Derrida's essay on Ricoeur, it is only rarely and merely in passing that one can identify in their writings brief references to each other's work.¹³ They have both been disinclined to embark on a productive and genuine *Auseinandersetzung*, to discuss the other's positions publicly in a way that would have made it easier for their readers clearly to determine the individual standpoints of the two philosophers, and, therefore, the elusive relationship between them. It is in view of such discrepancy and such reticence about explicitly taking on each other that the debate between them can be qualified as an unavailing one.¹⁴ Now that both thinkers have passed away, this abortive dialogue takes on an absolute dimension. The situation today seems irreversible and the opportunity of a fruitful encounter, of which they did not take advantage in the past, appears to have been irremediably missed, something which gives rise to a certain poignancy.

In response to this situation, some commentators tend to affirm an incongruity between the thought of Ricoeur and Derrida, no matter how much they may disagree over the philosophical merit of each thinker. If one briefly focuses on two of the most polarizing approaches, one finds, at one end of the spectrum, J. Hillis Miller's acerbic 1987 review of Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* (1983–85). Miller attributes to Ricoeur "a conspicuously reactionary role within current critical theory and practice," and bluntly claims that *all* of his basic presuppositions are mistaken, while opposing such conservatism to Derrida's infinitely more rigorous and radical formulations.¹⁵ At the other end, Stephen H. Clark criticizes Derrida for his dependency "on a series of restrictive and unstated premises derived from structuralism," his profound orthodoxy and tendency "to merge back into the pack, distinguished only by his absence of generosity towards a past history of error." At the same time, Clark praises Ricoeur for his exploratory, radical interventions and "cross-disciplinary thought," which

he designates as post-structuralist.¹⁶ However differently they may perceive the intellectual value of Ricoeur and Derrida, Miller and Clark concur in opposing the two thinkers to one another, in portraying their relation in terms of difference and divergence.

Leonard Lawlor's *Imagination and Chance* offers a much more balanced account. This book-length study does not fall prey to the simplifying temptation to oppose Ricoeur to Derrida by hastily endorsing a watertight division between them. On the contrary, Lawlor cautiously admits that things are much more complicated and synopsizes, in his introduction entitled "A Barely Visible Difference," the similarities between the two philosophers as follows: they both agree that thought cannot achieve self-knowledge by means of intuitive self-reflection, that thought has to externalize and mediate itself in repeatable signs, and that linguistic mediation disallows the possibility of a "complete mediation" whereby the origin would be recovered in all of its determinations.¹⁷ In light of such overwhelming and blurring affinities, the work of Derrida is said to be "almost indistinguishable" from Ricoeur's.¹⁸

And yet, Lawlor identifies "a barely visible difference" as far as the role of mediation is concerned. On the one hand, mediation, for Derrida, is qualified as originary non-presence, discontinuity, and difference, and incorporates an element of chance that forestalls any safe transition from thought back to thought. Derridean *differance*, argues Lawlor, accounts for the unforeseeable accident that is considered to be inherent in the sign's structure; as a result, it cannot be conceived of as circularity or linearity but, rather, as a zigzag movement. On the other hand, Ricoeur's mediation constitutes a dialectical concept articulating origin and end, *arche* and *telos*. Functioning as a safe passage from present back to present, mediation is always placed into the service of presence, identity, immediacy, and continuity. While Ricoeur accepts that mediation is intimately bound up with a distance or absence that prevents it from reaching an absolute degree, still, complete mediation is maintained as a task and distanciation is said to be regulated by the always receding horizon of complete identity.¹⁹

Accordingly, Lawlor purports to have pinned down an almost imperceptible difference, the illumination of which constitutes the thematic axis of *Imagination and Chance*. His conclusion, suggestively entitled "The Difference Illuminated," consolidates the idea of differentiation in terms of four specific motifs: the origin of mediation, the transitional point or mediation itself, the end or destiny of mediation, and, finally, the Idea in the Kantian sense.²⁰ I will return below to Lawlor's fine study, but what needs to be stressed here is his insistence on a difference that, albeit "barely visible," is nonetheless thought to belong to the order of a metaphorical visibility or phenomenality.²¹

As one of my objectives is clearly and accurately to bring into focus the difference between these two most prominent continental philosophers, this

study constitutes a continuation and expansion of Lawlor's project.²² I will juxtapose and reflect on texts in which Derrida and Ricoeur address similar issues or scrutinize the work of thinkers such as Edmund Husserl, Sigmund Freud, and Emmanuel Lévinas. The thematic organization of my project involves interpretative decisions, and, in this respect, a margin of contingency appears inevitable. Without wishing to reduce this margin, I would like to point up some of the reasons that have led to these decisions.

The confrontation staged in the first two chapters, whose thematic focus is the relation between continuity and discontinuity, takes place on the basis of a certain commonality, namely, their shared interest in phenomenology and psychoanalysis. Ricoeur's translation of and commentary on Husserl's *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (1913) appears as early as 1950 and is the work that establishes his reputation as a leading expert on phenomenology.²³ The appeal of Husserl's thought remains undiminished throughout Ricoeur's career and he keeps returning to it even in his later writings. It is not by chance that his own philosophy has been portrayed as a ramification of "hermeneutic phenomenology."²⁴ Similarly, the early phases of Derrida's career are marked by an intense preoccupation with phenomenology thanks, to a great extent, to Ricoeur's rigorous reflection on the *Ideas I*.²⁵ Derrida's first published work in 1962 is a translation and extended commentary entitled *Edmund Husserl's "Origin of Geometry": An Introduction*, but, already before that, his higher studies dissertation, written in 1953–54 and published belatedly in 1990, was devoted to the problem of genesis in Husserl's philosophy.²⁶ Both Ricoeur and Derrida turn to Freud in the mid '60s in order to address, in their own idiosyncratic ways, problems left unresolved by Husserl.²⁷

My concentration specifically on the two thinkers' readings, on the one hand, of Husserl's exegesis of temporalization, and, on the other, of psychoanalysis as a radicalization of phenomenology, has been motivated by two interdependent factors. Firstly, I believe that this juxtaposition allows one to gain a vantage point from which to examine the gulf separating Ricoeur's dialectical construal of the present from Derrida's affirmation of discontinuity and interruption. Secondly, by virtue of the fact that Lawlor devotes only a few pages to Husserl's analysis of time-consciousness and makes almost no reference to Freud, my discussion brings to light some aspects of the encounter between Ricoeur and Derrida that perhaps lie beyond the scope of *Imagination and Chance*.²⁸ This exigency of investigating the link between Husserl and Freud is underlined by Derrida's coupling of phenomenology to hermeneutics, both of which he distinguishes from psychoanalysis, a gesture already anticipated in one of his questions to Gadamer in 1981 that concerned the challenge of psychoanalysis to hermeneutics.²⁹

The thematic framework of the third and fourth chapters is provided by the two philosophers' preoccupation with singularity and generality, which

will be initially studied on the basis of their sustained attention to signification and language. I mentioned, above, Lawlor's remark that both thinkers reject the idea of transparent self-reflection and admit that thought is possible only if it is mediated by signs and externalized. Several of Ricoeur's works published between the late '60s and the mid '80s are characterized by their focus on spoken or written discourse, hence the use of the phrase "linguistic" or "hermeneutic turn" to describe that phase of his career.³⁰ Similarly, Derrida is interested, right from the beginning, in the functioning of the linguistic sign. In "The Time of a Thesis: Punctuations" (1983), he recalls that the title he had submitted around 1957 for his first thesis topic was "The Ideality of the Literary Object," a study of the problematics of communication and literary meaning.³¹ Subsequently, the overwhelming majority of his published work in the '60s and '70s is concerned with the structure of signification as attested to by *Writing and Difference*, *Of Grammatology* (1967), *Speech and Phenomena* (1967), *Dissemination* (1972), *Positions* (1972), and *Margins of Philosophy*.³²

As Lawlor has extensively studied the two philosophers' debate on metaphor, I will focus here on their analyses of deixis and the first-person perspective, which, with the help of Ricoeur's "hermeneutics of the self" and dialectics of narration and prescription, will function as points of transition leading to the ethical relation between self and other. I will investigate their disparate accounts of Husserl's interpretation of intersubjectivity, but also their response to some of Lévinas's writings on alterity and responsibility.³³ On the basis of this confrontation on singularity and generality, I will explicate Ricoeur's self-characterization as a "post-Hegelian Kantian,"³⁴ as well as Derrida's tendency to resist, without straightforwardly opposing, the dialectical structure germane to Ricoeur's thought.

To avoid, however, subscribing to too teleological a construal of the difference between the two thinkers—a construal indissociable from the terms *debate* and *dialogue*—another strand of this book will reflect, following Derrida, on the nature of this difference. A radical thinking of difference will be announced, a thinking that, while allowing for the ordinary teleological conceptuality, takes difference seriously into account and cautiously refuses to determine it in a negative and provisional way. This alternative interpretation turns out to have serious implications for the debate between Ricoeur and Derrida, as this has been portrayed thus far.

In a sense, if a debate is not to be reduced to a banal situation where two partners harmoniously communicate to each other beliefs they already share, it has to presuppose a moment of absolute distance. Without this moment of interruption or discord, there is no dialogue but simply a complacent confirmation of ideas the interlocutors know they anyway share. If such a radical difference constitutes the a priori requirement of any event of dialogue, if there is no genuine encounter without or before that moment of violent interruption,

then this moment can be relegated neither to an empirical accident nor to a negative and provisional necessity. Rather, alterity and non-dialogue have to be construed as *positive* structural possibilities without which dialogue *stricto sensu* would not stand a chance.

Although Ricoeur's and Derrida's shared thematic concerns, their common intellectual context and their philosophical discrepancies may constitute interesting empirico-historical information, they cannot function as necessary conditions able to give rise to a genuine encounter between them. Such a condition can be supplied by an ineluctable and positively determined distance alone. It is in this light that the non-dialogue or non-event apparently lamented at the beginning of this introduction, far from regretfully instantiating a contingent failure, functions as the positive condition of a promised debate. The missed opportunity of a fruitful exchange in the past will have succeeded in making possible an encounter respectful of the two thinkers' irreplaceability. What is at stake here is a non-dialogue whose "non" does not indicate a negative actuality but a radical heterogeneity that promises the event of an encounter worthy of its name.³⁵ Owing, however, to the essential character of such heterogeneity, a dialogue or a debate, in the ordinary sense of these terms, is rendered at the same time impossible. To the extent that the chance of an encounter depends on an a priori required distance, this chance will always be marked by alterity, so it will never become a dialogue, given that the latter is intended, by definition, to overcome and suppress difference.

If the chance of a genuine debate cannot indeed be disengaged from the exigency of absolute alterity and non-dialogue, is the term *debate* worthy of this structure? If the possibility of dialogue is grounded in an originary non-dialogue, is this not to say that the words *debate* or *dialogue*, which imply some common ground or a shared objective, cannot appropriately bear witness to this complex configuration? This is why it is tempting to describe the "relation" between Ricoeur and Derrida in terms of "improbable encounters."³⁶ This expression, to the extent that it affirms both a radical difference and the chance of a meeting of texts bearing their signature, respects the two thinkers' irreducible singularity. The improbable or uncanny encounter between them, which the second strand of this study calls for, will never be a debate in the sense of a juxtaposition simply or dialectically opposing their work in view of a synthesis or reconciliation. At best, one can speak of an apposition, a placement next to each other of discussions of texts, which perhaps, like two parallel lines, may meet at infinity.³⁷

The belief in such improbable encounters, indebted to Derrida's thought, constitutes a fundamental methodological presupposition reflected in the structuring principle of my study. On the one hand, the first and the third chapters focus on Ricoeur's work, whereas chapters 2 and 4 are devoted to Derrida. It is possible *prima facie* to delimit and identify the position the two thinkers

occupy vis-à-vis the texts they read. On the other hand, the two chapters on Derrida will reveal a reading strategy that will give rise to another thinking of difference, identity, and position. According to a familiar Derridean gesture that differentiates between the author's declared intentions and his or her descriptions,³⁸ I will briefly revisit Ricoeur's texts to see if one can discover therein any moments interrupting his expressly hermeneutic assertions. Ricoeur's discourse will be shown to include possibilities that can be hardly maintained simultaneously, and, as a consequence, the relation between the two philosophers will turn out to be more complicated than initially thought. I will argue that such a complication alone, which is not without a parallel as far as Derrida's relation to reflective philosophy and hermeneutics is concerned, allows for an uncompromising singularity without seeking to negate, exclude, or subordinate difference to a desired commonality. Moreover, this reading does justice to the complexity and richness of Ricoeur's and Derrida's texts by resisting the temptation of associating them, once and for all, with either deconstruction or hermeneutics.

Before delineating in greater detail the thematics of this study, it has to be underlined that there is significant overlapping between all four chapters in more than one way. The themes specific to any one chapter are imbricated across the whole book. As a result, the link between singularity and generality is broached much earlier than the third chapter, and the movement of temporalization constitutes a motif overflowing the limits of the first two chapters. In addition, there are thematic concerns of equal salience diffused throughout the book, such as the finitude-infinity binary, the exigency of distance and interruption, the relation between repetition and difference, or that between possibility and impossibility.

The first chapter focuses on the coupling of consciousness and presence in Ricoeur's construal of Husserl and Freud. The third volume of *Time and Narrative* considers Husserl's theory of temporalization to provide a coherent approach to the *human* experience of time to be opposed to the *cosmological* time of nature. Ricoeur examines the phenomenological "thick present," and underscores that Husserl's major contribution was the intercalation of the concept of "retention" into the realm of perception. What is crucial, however, is the relation between primary intuition and retention, and the extent to which Ricoeur endorses the phenomenological emphasis on continuity. According to Husserl's manifest declarations, this continuity is interrupted as soon as one crosses the borderline separating perception from memory, whose corollary is the coupling of intuition and immediate presence. Dissatisfied with such a coupling, Ricoeur draws upon Kant's conception of temporality and Freudian psychoanalysis in order to question the self-sufficiency and immediacy of the Husserlian ego.

By virtue of his early quantitative hypothesis and the later topographical and economic models, Freud introduces distance into the very heart of perception, thereby casting into doubt the transparency of conscious presence. In the first instance, Ricoeur embraces Freud's critique of immediate consciousness and commends the anti-phenomenological reduction by means of which psychoanalysis suspends the properties of the transcendental subject. At the same time, he does not wish to give up all hope with respect to the possibility that the subject may attain, with the help of the analyst and the analytical technique, a certain self-reflexivity. Consequently, although Ricoeur admits to the necessary alterity of Freudian categories such as the primary process, the pleasure principle, the unconscious, the death drive, etc., still, these are determined as negative phases dialectically linked to a positive and meaningful reappropriation.

Ricoeur's nuanced discourse both allows for the idea that unconscious activity *as such* remains inaccessible and highlights that the dialectical character of most psychoanalytical divisions makes possible the appropriation of an initial non-presence. He articulates the *actual impossibility* of attaining an absolute mediation with the *conceptual possibility* of such a mediation posited as a *telos* or a task never to be actually achieved. The infinite idea of a reflective consciousness gives rise to a mediated self purged from the hubristic belief in self-constitution. In spite of incorporating some Freudian insights in order to expose the illusion of a transparent consciousness, Ricoeur's philosophy remains indebted to a continuist and dialectical conception of presence.

Chapter 2 begins by exploring Derrida's response to Husserl's lectures on time-consciousness in *Speech and Phenomena* with a view to revealing the extent to which Ricoeur underplays the implications of the introduction of retention qua alterity into the perceptual present. According to a reading gesture outlined above, Derrida distinguishes Husserl's declared intentions from his actual descriptions. As a result of this tension, a certain distance between original intuition and retention turns out to be absolutely irreducible, which entails that one is not justified in stressing the primacy of continuity. If difference is neither an empirical eventuality that may befall the temporal present here and there, nor a negative necessity anticipating a plenitude of presence, in what terms is one supposed to think of its irreducibility? The philosophical configuration of "necessary possibility" and the quasi-concept of *differance* will reveal a paradoxical commingling of presence and absence, continuity and discontinuity. Although this aporetic structure and its syncopated temporality are far removed from Husserl's manifest declarations, his analyses contain traces that invite one to conceive of non-presence in a nonnegative, non-teleological fashion.

Next, following Derrida's early work on Freud, I will evaluate Ricoeur's conviction about the dialectical nature of psychoanalysis. If such a dialectics rests on the oppositional determination of perception and memory, life and

death, pleasure and reality, etc., are these oppositions safely sustained by Freud's accounts of the psychical apparatus? Or does Freudian discourse bear witness, on the contrary, to a permeable-impermeable borderline that gives rise to all those values while excluding a watertight dichotomy between them? Derrida affirms a peculiar diastem that is the only chance of a present intuition, the memory trace, and psychical life in general. Paradoxically, this diastem has to be thought of in terms of a *differance* that complicates opposition and, by extension, dialectics. Freud's *Nachträglichkeit* goes some way toward capturing the discontinuous temporality involved in such a structure. To what extent does psychoanalysis differ from phenomenology in light of the fact that Husserl too allows, by virtue of retention, for a certain difference as constitutive of the living present?

Another set of issues I will address here is the significance of Freud's portrayal of psychical processes in terms of increasingly intricate scriptural metaphors. What does this metaphorics imply not only for perception and memory but also for the act of writing itself? Does psychical writing function according to a topography, or does it disturb any ordinary understanding of spatiality? Can the psychical text be understood on the basis of conventional temporal categories, or does it originate in an aporetic temporalization resistant to permanence and identity? I will explore the disjuncture between Freud's commitment to interpretation and certain descriptive moments that call upon one to think the *impossibility* of acceding to an original psychical inscription or mnemonic trace. Finally, I will revisit Ricoeur's discourse in order to identify therein instances that, by allowing for a more interruptive thinking of non-presence, undercut his dialectics of archaeology and teleology. This latter gesture complicates any attempt definitely and securely to differentiate Ricoeur's thought from Derrida's.

The last two chapters will focus on singularity and the relation between self and other. Chapter 3 will present Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self, which admittedly has taken on board the criticism leveled by psychoanalysis and structuralist linguistics at various "philosophies of the subject," thereby resisting any straightforwardly Cartesian, Kantian, or Husserlian conception of subjectivity.³⁹ In both early and more recent writings, Ricoeur is keen to establish a link between the subject or the self and singularity. As far as language is concerned, the use of the personal pronoun is claimed to designate transparently and singularly the speaker of discourse. By underlining the self-referential and singularizing function of the speech act, he seeks to achieve a mediation between Husserl's belief in the subject as the self-constituting principle of language and the structuralist rejoinder that language is an autonomous entity that cannot be reduced to a medium at the disposal of a sovereign self.

Besides, I will examine the two types of identity, *idem* and *ipse*, introduced in *Time and Narrative* but more fully developed in *Oneself as Another*. Their

dialecticization will lead to “narrative identity,” a motif that takes into consideration both the possibility of change and the self-constancy that ethics requires. Insofar as such self-constancy cannot be guaranteed on the level of literature, it has to be linked to the prescriptive realm of ethics where a truly responsible agent ought to take the initiative and publicly declare “Here I stand!” The hermeneutic functions of “refiguration” and “appropriation” serve as the points of transition from the literary to the ethical. This passage from plurality to a singular responsibility is ensured by the regulative Idea of the “good life,” on whose basis the notion of the “ethical self” is developed. The ethical self is yoked together with action, decision, and benevolence, categories mediated by a certain passivity and finitude originating in the call of the suffering other. Ricoeur defines the ethical relation in terms of friendship and reciprocity, whose corollary is the dialectical pairing of selfhood and alterity, activity and passivity. His reflection is dominated by this dialectic, through which he negotiates a median position between Husserl’s assimilative interpretation of the alter ego and Lévinas’s hyperbolic discourse on absolute exteriority.

Does Ricoeur succeed in reinscribing the philosophies of the *cogito* after assimilating the challenges of psychoanalysis and structuralism? What are the implications of the concepts of benevolence, mutuality, and friendship with respect to the other’s alterity? Is the idea of a singular self compatible with the generality that inheres in a prescriptive ethical domain regulated by the Idea of the “good life”? Does the public declaration “Here I stand!” sufficiently guarantee one’s ethical behavior and singularly assumed responsibility?

Chapter 4 complicates the link between selfhood and singularity. I will initially concentrate on Derrida’s discussion of the personal pronoun, which casts doubt upon the supposedly singularizing role of language. Insofar as the phenomenon of deixis in general can be shown to be subject to the law of iterability, the latter introduces a minimal exemplarity or generalizability into the heart of a singular referent. Although this gesture might be regarded as assimilating deictics to other words, thus subordinating referential singularity to the transcendental conditions of language, the argument is far more subtle than this. Derrida infiltrates the realm of signification with a “referentiality” that cannot be dialectically opposed to an interior sense or conceptuality.

If iterability cannot be disengaged from the necessary possibility of non-presence, the self-identity of the referent is rendered problematic, and along with it the belief in language as a means of expression and singular responsibility. In some of his recent writings, Derrida reveals an originary co-implication of language and secrecy that gives rise to language while excluding the possibility of pure truthfulness or transparency. This secrecy does not refer to something that can be provisionally dissimulated but remains nonetheless subject to representation. Rather, at issue here is a secret that, heterogeneous to visibility and phenomenality, is responsible for the promissory and aleatory nature of

language. Such a construal anchors the possibility of truthful speech and singular responsibility in an anterior pervertibility. Paradoxically, Ricoeur's theory of discourse will be found to contain traces that call upon one to think a similar commingling of speech and secrecy, something that corroborates my contention about the "improbable encounters" between the two philosophers.

Subsequently, beginning with Derrida's reflection on the phrase "to be in memory of the other," I will unpack the aporetic structure whereby singularity and alterity are deconstituted by what makes their emergence possible.⁴⁰ A rigorous concept of singularity requires *a priori* the other's radical alterity, hence Derrida's concurrence with Lévinas's views on absolute exteriority. At the same time, in order for one to be able to refer to such alterity, the other has to be somewhat phenomenalizable. This exigency of a minimal contact, on whose basis Derrida reveals resources of Husserl's account of intersubjectivity that remain unexplored by both Lévinas and Ricoeur, entails yoking together necessity and chance, and leads to a differentiation between "absolute alterity" and "irreducible alterity." Derrida's approach can be seen as radicalizing, in a sense, Lévinas's thought. By virtue of his insistence on an ineluctable discontinuity between self and other, the possibility of singularity and the impossibility of a purely singular self cannot be teleologically organized. Strangely enough, it is this non-teleological structure and the corollary interruption that ensure the infinity of the Idea in the Kantian sense.

This study makes no pretence of constituting an exhaustive investigation into all the contexts and authors one could legitimately claim to have played a significant role in shaping Derrida's and Ricoeur's thought. Any such contention would be clearly out of the question considering the vast array of issues that have preoccupied the two thinkers over a period of seventy years, the complexity of the philosophical problems they have addressed, but also the sheer magnitude of their published output. Rather, these readings illuminate, on the basis of some major themes in their work, the *barely visible* difference that Lawlor identifies, and simultaneously put forward the idea of an *absolutely invisible* difference giving rise to a "singular" dialogue,⁴¹ promised interchanges, and improbable encounters between hermeneutics and deconstruction. Those two strands will remain inextricably interrelated throughout this book, and the second one will keep impinging, in principle and in fact, upon the first one.