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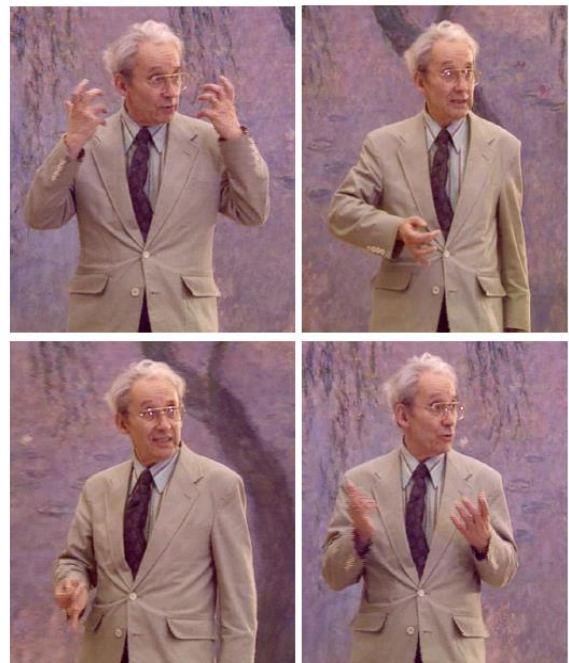
The Water Lilies of the Orangerie, Ricoeur and the Flâneur (on the Cover Image)

For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world – impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito. The lover of life makes the whole world his family, just like the lover of the fair sex who builds up his family from all the beautiful women that he has ever found, or that are or are not – to be found; or the lover of pictures who lives in a magical society of dreams painted on canvas. Thus the lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy. Or we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life.

[C. Baudelaire]¹

«*Le flâneur – Nymphéas Orangerie*» is the title that Olivier Abel (president of the Scientific Council of the *Fonds Ricoeur*) gave to one of his *Entretien* with Ricoeur. We can read the two pages of this dialogue in the booklet (*Paul Ricoeur. Le tragique et la promesse*) that accompanies the double DVD about the life and work of the French thinker: [Paul Ricoeur. Philosophe de tous les dialogues](#)². The film language configures and refigures – with images, clips of interviews (of Ricoeur and his friends/interpreters), photos and video fragments – Ricoeur’s entire journey, a journey that is symbolically presented in a circular manner. We do not know if this was really the intent of the authors (C. Reussner, O. Abel, F. Dosse). But in our eyes, focused on the *Water Lilies* of the Orangerie, the symbolic ‘circle’ (‘symbolic’ more than ‘hermeneutical’ circle) is evident.

In the booklet, the last pages are about the Orangerie. While, in the film, the scenes of the video presenting the *flâneur* – i.e. Ricoeur, who ‘walks’ in front of Monet’s *Water Lilies* (and interprets them, interpreting the world in them) – are at the beginning. As if to say that we are faced with a double symbol, which contains and presents the very meaning of the work of Ricoeur: that of the *flâneur* and that of the Orangerie.



P. Ricoeur devant les Nymphéas de Claude Monet, à l'Orangerie, tirées du film *Le tragique et la promesse* (F2, 1991)

¹ C. Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1964.

² *Paul Ricoeur, philosophe de tous les dialogues*, Conception et co-auteur avec François Dosse du DVD, film de Caroline Reussner Editions Montparnasse, Paris, 2008. Avec le livret de l'entretien de 1991, *Le tragique et la promesse*.

1) The circular gaze of *The Water Lilies*

We start from the *Water Lilies*.

Take a few minutes of time and, if you have been to this lovely museum in Paris, go back in your mind to that experience. And, if you have not been lucky enough to go there, at least take a virtual tour, through the reconstruction that is available on the museum's website (www.musee-orangerie.fr/homes/home_id25184_u1l2.htm), or through one of the many videos on youtube.

What first appears is the idea of a being-inside: inside the world of the water lilies. You (*subject*) are not 'in front' of an *object* (a painting). Indeed, the images are 'around' you and your gaze is really 'forced' to move in a circular way, because Monet's paintings 'force' you to do this.

While [the house of Klee \(with which we opened the first issue of "Logoi"\) was a Rotating House](#), the *Water Lilies* of the Orangerie is a circular painting, an ellipse: and that is a new paradox. In any case, it is the paradox of the hermeneutical circle, of being-in-the-world, already and forever. It is the



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failure of any form of dualistic 'modernity', of all self-centered subjectivity. However, Monet is not even the symbol of the dissolved and annihilated Self. We know that, for Ricoeur, the alternative is not between 'exalted Cogito' and 'humiliated Cogito'; the alternative is the dialectic between *idem* and *ipse*, in the fragility of history, that each of us is called to narrate, to live, to be³.

This is exactly the end of the discussion/dialogue of Ricoeur at the Orangerie: «ce lieu qui est à la fois clos renvoie en même temps au-delà de ses propres bornes. Il est là comme un 'horizon' de perception et non pas comme un 'objet' de perception»⁴.

The transition from the (modern) Subject to the narrative Self is the same passage that happens in Monet, from the painting-object (of Renaissance/Modernity) to the painting-horizon. It is the same passage that happens from the perspective vision to the impressionistic and ellipsoidal vision of the Orangerie.

However the world, in Monet as in Ricoeur, does not shatter in a series of 'naïve' and random impressions. In this, Ricoeur is not post-modern in the sense of Lyotard (this is reaffirmed by the acute observations of G. Taylor, in this issue of "Logoi")⁵.

Just as the world of Monet is 'built' on impressions («rien n'est plus construit que l'impressionnisme» - Ricoeur says⁶), so is our everyday world 'prefigured' in the patterns

³ See P. Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, Seuil, Paris, 1990.

⁴ P. Ricoeur, *Entretien avec Olivier Abel pour le film l'Antenne 2 – Presence protestante des 15 et 22 décembre 1991*; réalisateur C. Vajda, in O. Abel, *Paul Ricoeur. Le tragique et la promesse*, cit., p. 27.

⁵ G. H. Taylor, *Ricoeur, la narrazione e il giusto*, in "Logoi", 2015, I, 2, pp. 224-231.

⁶ P. Ricoeur, *Entretien avec Olivier Abel pour le film l'Antenne 2*, cit., p. 26.

(both mental and of action) that allow us to inhabit it; and it is repeatedly configured and refigured in our imaginative, narrative and conceptual constructions⁷.

Here Monet emerges as three times symbolic: symbolic in his way of experiencing art, symbolic in his way of living time, symbolic in his way of living life.

2) Monet as a symbol: in his life, in his time, in his art

Monet as a symbol in his way of living life. Indeed – Ricoeur reminds us – *The Water Lilies* are the result of a challenge to the fragility of the body.

Pensez à l'intervalle de peine, de douleur, de travail qu'il y a entre les impressions reçues du monde et puis cette construction d'impressions. Près de dix ans de souffrances physiques: Monet est quasiment aveugle, on l'a opéré plusieurs fois des yeux, sans succès: il ne voit plus ses couleurs. Il est comme Beethoven qui, sourd, construit dans sa tête la totalité des sons⁸.

It is the pain of existence, wounded by the otherness that inhabits it, by its limitations, by the inability to *be, everything*, all the way; existence that, however, even in the most 'liminal' situations does not give up on *being, despite everything*: «*vivant jusqu'à la morte*»⁹. Monet, Beethoven are 'extreme' artists, who, in their excruciating tension, reveal the tragic (and amazing) movement that crosses all 'true' forms of art, all 'true' forms of life. Painting that does not see colors. Music that does not listen to the sounds. Life that does not feel like itself. Yet it paints, composes, still desires life.

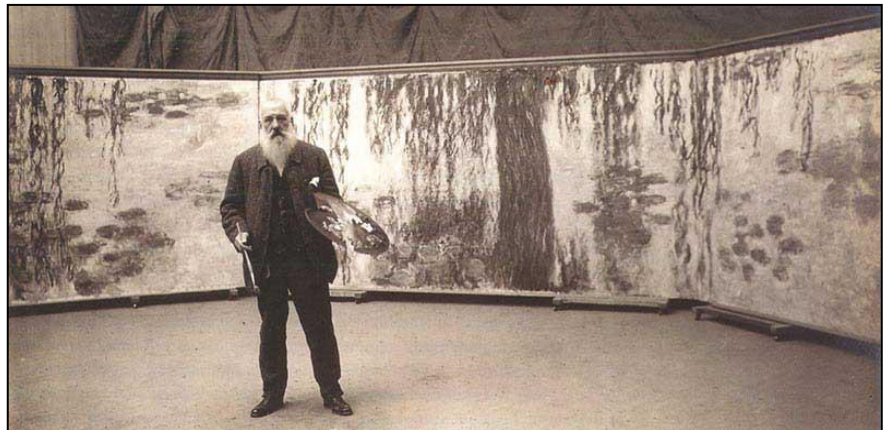
Let us also think about *the way Monet lives (his) time*. Ricoeur says:

J'ajouterai même quelque chose qui nous remettra en relation avec (...) la promesse: tout ce que nous voyons ici, est de l'ordre d'une promesse tenue. Son ami Clémenceau lui avait arraché la promesse qu'en signe de *reconnaissance* [*my italics*] pour la victoire, il ferait à la Nation, à l'Etat français, cette donation de son œuvre¹⁰.

Monet lives time experiencing the history of his country: *recognizing it with gratitude (reconnaissance)*.

Of course, it may seem paradoxical.

Indeed, painting water lilies at Giverny, while the war is at the gates of Paris, can only seem like a form of disengagement: political, cultural, artistic disengagement. But art becomes part of history exactly by 'resisting' in counter-history¹¹.



Monet in his refuge-garden remains himself. This is the first promise kept. It is the identity-*ipse*, which remains 'despite' time, despite changes, despite history. The identity of the promise: to remain true to oneself, to one's own choices, to one's vocation.

⁷ Think of Ricoeurian theory of *mimesis I-II-III*.

⁸ P. Ricoeur, *Entretien avec Olivier Abel pour le film l'Antenne 2*, cit., p. 26.

⁹ See Id., *Vivant jusqu'à la morte*, Seuil, Paris, 2007.

¹⁰ Id., *Entretien avec Olivier Abel pour le film l'Antenne 2*, cit., p. 26.

¹¹ See P. Ricoeur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance. Trois études*, Stock, Paris, 2004, p. 354.

The artist demonstrates only that to which every person is called, the choice (either-either-or) between

- remaining rigidly and blindly attached to his beliefs, without ever questioning them (*idem*),
- or continuously dissolving his beliefs, not keeping anything of himself (*anti-idem*),
- or searching, with suffering and continuous work, for continuity in discontinuity, a pattern of meaning in the continuous modification of events: building oneself as history, as the history of life (*ipse*).

The last option, we know, is what Ricoeur calls ‘narrative identity’. It is also that which artists live (often despite themselves).

Et il faut dire que chaque œuvre est la résolution d'un problème: comment précisément articuler la forme, la couleur, la lumière? Chaque fois la disposition des termes du problème suscite une réponse singulière; c'est ce qui fait que nous disons « c'est un Monet »; et le nom propre, c'est le nom du style, de l'œuvre¹².



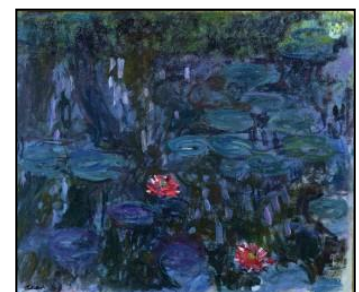
We will come back several times, in the essays in this issue, to deal with the problem of the singularity of artwork and with the paradoxical identity of the artist. In the interview *Arts, Language and Hermeneutic Aesthetics*, Ricoeur links, in an even more explicit way, narrative identity with the style of an artist.

[P. Ricoeur] We could even say that the artist is the unity of multiple works: what is not said in one is said in another. The identity of the creator multiplies itself, fragments itself and is recomposed through this series which constitutes the approximation of an unsayable. In addition we recognize the works; we say, it's a Cezanne, it's a Monet. The series – this is what creates the interest, testifying to the identity of the creator.



The inexhaustible is perhaps also the inexhaustible of identity-ipseity, that, to cite you, of a subject capable of designating itself as being himself the author of his words and acts, a non-substantial and non-immutable subject, but nonetheless one responsible for his saying and doing. Ultimately, do we not recognize the ipseity of a Picasso even though he also has changed from one period to another?

[P. Ricoeur]: I had tried to extend beyond its birthplace this risky distinction between two kinds of identity, the repetitive identity of the same, of the *idem* or ‘sameness’, on the one hand, and the identity in process of the *ipse*, on the other (...). I had thought first of all of the narrative construction of identity in ipseity, but I had also applied it to its keeping a promise: I will hold myself to the ‘keeping’. Is there not also a keeping, a maintaining, which brings it about that one recognizes in a single work the same author? This is an interesting sameness, since it is the sameness of a succession within novelty. Each work is each time a new work, but one which, in participating in a series, designates the ipseity of the creator, (...) a self-constancy in diversity. In addition there is here an ethical aspect. ‘I will hold myself’, this is a promise kept, in any case a plan followed, a fidelity to oneself, which is not a repetitive imitation, but a creation faithful to itself, a fidelity in the progression of the same promise, in the multiplicity of its effectuations¹³.



¹² P. Ricoeur, *Entretien avec Olivier Abel pour le film l'Antenne 2*, cit., p. 26.

¹³ Id., *Arts, Language and Hermeneutic Aesthetics. Interview with Paul Ricoeur. Conducted by Jean-Marie Brohm and Magali Uhl* (September 20, 1996 in Paris), tr. engl. by R.D. Sweeney and J. Carroll: <http://www.philagora.net/philo-fac/ricoeur-e7.php>.

The examples of Cézanne and Monet – stubbornly faithful to their objects (think of the *Mountain Sainte-Victoire* for the former and the *Water Lilies* for the latter), but always waiting to capture the slightest change (of light, color, space, time) of the objects themselves – they are not random. Cézanne and Monet are, for Ricoeur, the ultimate symbol of the artistic tension: to speak of the 'same' world always in a 'different' way; or (which is the same) to speak of the incessant diversity of the world, looking for the lines of continuity in it. Artists teach us to live the time of the continuous-discontinuous, the time for the 'keeping' and for the promise.

Some of them, then (Monet among them), also make explicit the hidden historical and political meaning of their enterprise. As we read before, Ricoeur points out that, in his apparent disengagement, Monet hides a promise: that of *recognizing* 'his' France, of '*thanking it*' for its historic victory, of expressing his *reconnaissance* for the many who were fighting and had fought on the front line, while he continued to struggle with the colors (against the dark); but, above all, the promise of thanking France and celebrating peace.



The Orangerie had already been built in the mid-19th century and designed as a greenhouse (and then as a stable and gym). In 1914 Monet was already working on those water lilies that would (among other works) turn that refuge into a museum¹⁴.

...We recommend a break, to see two and a half minutes of video: <http://lewisartcafe.com/tag/giverny/>.

Clemenceau convinced Monet to promise a donation. That promise was fulfilled in 1918, when, to celebrate the Armistice, Monet offered France his gift of peace. Still unfinished, however, the gift remained in Giverny. Monet continued to work on it (identity in change) until his death; and, therefore, he did not see the exhibition of his paintings in the Orangerie (installed in 1927). Hence, his gesture was unfinished, even in the fulfillment of the gift: like every promise.

Even in this, we said, *Monet is symbolic: in his way of living art, as unfinished.*

La peinture ne pose pas un problème différent de la narration par exemple, parce que chaque fois il y a recréation d'un monde, d'un monde complet. Vous voyez ici le ciel, l'eau, le végétal. Vous ne savez plus ce qui est reflet du ciel dans l'eau, ce qui est réception du ciel par l'eau... Les nénuphars, ces lys d'eau, sont la totalité d'un monde parce qu'on pourrait dire: c'est le monde tel qu'on ne l'a jamais vu. En ce sens, rien ne serait plus trompeur que de dire que nous avons ici simplement une image, c'est-à-dire moins que le réel. Ici vous avez plus que le réel. En ce sens, on pourrait dire que c'est un 'sur/réalisme', si le mot n'avait pas été pris dans un autre contexte. Comme je le disais, c'est le monde tel qu'on ne l'a jamais vu, mais que, du même coup, nous pouvons habiter¹⁵.



¹⁴ Between 1899 and 1908, Monet had already painted a huge number of paintings on this theme. 48 had been exposed in 1909 and many others were destroyed by Monet himself.

¹⁵ P. Ricoeur, *Entretien avec Olivier Abel pour le film l'Antenne 2*, cit., pp. 26-27.



This is the role of art (of painting, of literature, of poetry, of music, of cinema). It is what, for Ricoeur, is generally the task of hermeneutics, because it is the task of language: to speak a 'complete' world, a finished world: complete like a painting, like a piece of music or a film, like a novel or a poem. The world is 'here'. It is 'all' here. We can see it (if it is a painting); we can listen it (if it is music); we can read it (if it is written). The work shows a world: complete, finished. We enter into it and get lost in it. The *Water Lilies* of the Orangerie are highly symbolic in this way. We are 'in' the work of art, we said. And – to paraphrase Ricoeur, we could say – as 'receiver' we can only find ourselves by losing ourselves in it¹⁶. With the awareness that the artwork says and shows a complete world, but we will never be able to take it all in, because (as we have seen before) our perceptual horizon is limited and «ce lieu qui est à la fois clos renvoie en

même temps au-delà de ses propres bornes».

The work, in its completeness, is (however) always open; and man, in his opening, is (however) always limited. Therefore, the picture will be painted over and over again, until death (this is the paradox of Monet). Indeed, every time I deceive myself that I have defined the world in that particular color of water, in that particular play of the sky through the leaves, in that particular swaying of the light among the flowers ... once again the world has already moved on. And even I (reader, listener, viewer) have to chase my world again each time (in my relationships, in my work, in the works of art that I see, in the books I read).

So, then, in conclusion, we can return to the *flâneur*.

3) The gaze of the *flâneur*

Certainly the *flâneur* is the artist, as Baudelaire already taught¹⁷. We read it in the introductory *exergo*. The descriptions of the poet seem perfectly valid regarding the world of *The Water Lilies*: a world really envisioned as the possibility, in the heart of the 'crowd' and the 'noise' of Paris, to «set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite»; a world really envisioned as the possibility to be «away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world»; a

¹⁶ Ricoeur says: «as reader, I find myself only by losing myself» [P. Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and Human Sciences*, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 144].

¹⁷ See W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, tr. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1999 and G. Nuvolati, *Lo sguardo vagabondo. Il Flâneur e la città da Baudelaire ai postmoderni*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2006.

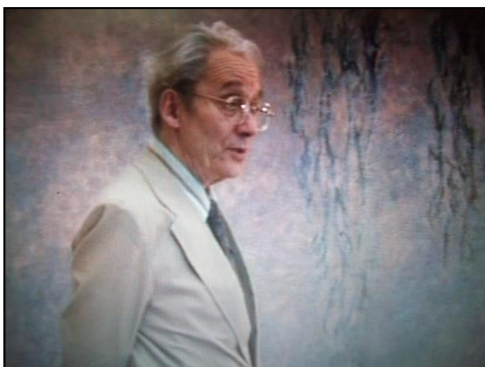
world really envisioned by a «passionate spectator», who wants to ‘look while walking’ (*flâneur*); who wants to waste time (*flâneur*) with a u-topian and un-useful space; who wants to interweave¹⁸ his impressions, «just like the lover of live, (...) the lover of the fair sex, (...) the lover of pictures, who lives in a magical society of dreams painted on canvas»¹⁹.

The descriptions of the poet seem perfectly valid regarding the world of the *Water Lilies* and Ricoeur’s interpretation of arts. Indeed art

enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy, or we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life²⁰.

However, the *flâneur* – in the *Entretien* that we have commented on and in the video/film that we mentioned at the beginning – here is Ricoeur himself.

In this way, Olivier Abel interprets and presents Ricoeur: indeed Abel constructs the text/interview *Paul Ricoeur. Le tragique et la promesse* as a pathway of arches. On the one hand, an experience, a sobriquet of Ricoeur’s, the indication of a phase, a fundamental step of his path («le militant; le professeur; le doyen; le lecteur; le *flâneur*»); on the other hand, a ‘place’ where, correspondingly, Ricoeur lived these experiences of identity (Chatenay-Malabry, la Sorbonne, Nanterre, Faculte de theologie protestante, and ...*Nymphéas Orangerie*).



So... the last paragraph is *Le flâneur – Nymphéas Orangerie*; and the *flâneur* here is Ricoeur, who, through all the identities which he lived (activist, professor, dean, reader) and all the places he passed through, ...he ‘passed through’: looking, thinking, traveling ...in the crowd, among the crowd, but with the astonished gaze of the artist-*flâneur*-Baudelairean, or with the astonished gaze of the philosopher, «always, with his spirit, in the condition of the convalescent»; always living «convalescence as a return to childhood». Indeed he «fervently desires to

remember everything» and he is capable of «keenly interesting himself in thing, be they apparently of the most trivial and see everything in a state of newness», because «curiosity has become a fatal irresistible passion»²¹.

This is the gaze of Ricoeur, in the video filmed in the Orangerie: which is the gaze with which he ‘passed through’ all the dialogues and all readings in his life; as if emerging again and again from a disease (the pain of the meeting/clash with otherness); like being reborn again and again in amazement: that freshness that even at age ninety led him to «never make use of self-celebratory verbs in the past tense, but to speak only in the future tense, with that humble discretion which again led him to say ‘I will



¹⁸ One of several etymological hypothesis links the term *flâneur* to the term 'flannel' (to weave wool), and then to stay at home in a non-productive time. We like to reconnect this metaphor to the theme of the interweaving / intrigue, typical of narrative identity of Ricoeur.

¹⁹ C. Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, cit.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ivi, chap. III.

have to study', 'I will have to have a discussion with that author', 'I will write this and then something else»²².

Indeed, maybe, the *flâneur* is not only the artist, not only the philosopher (as Ricoeur understood and interpreted it); but the artist and the philosopher can be the *flâneur* because in truth the *flâneur* is 'everyone', when 'everyone' is the name and the wager of Ricoeur: it is the name that replaces the idea of the Baudelairean 'crowd'; it is that possibility that each of us (in his singularity) has and is: to be an identity always in flux, to be 'narrative identity', to be a convalescent, with amazement, *despite everything*. This is, maybe, the meaning of the final 'colophon' of *Memory, History, Forgetting*:

*Sous l'histoire, la mémoire et l'oublie
Sous la mémoire et l'oublie, la vie.
Mais écrire la vie est une autre histoire.
Inachèvement*

²² [F. Abbate, *Dalle ideologie alla lotta per il riconoscimento: Paul Ricoeur e gli studi sull'immaginazione politica*, "Logoi", 2015, I, 2, p. 232.](#)