

Érica Martinelli Munhoz, Gustavo Marçon Puppim

“Pas de puis[s]ance d[']imagination sans images pui[s]sante[s]”*: literature on the horizon of Bachelard and Ricœur**

1. Bachelard, Ricœur and contemporary Literary Studies¹

The dialogue between the works of Gaston Bachelard and Paul Ricœur, thoroughly discussed in works such as Amalric's² *Paul Ricœur, L'imagination vive*, had been previously established by Ricœur³ himself in the recently published *Lectures on Imagination*, in which the author dedicates a great part of the third section to the discussion with Bachelard's works regarding poetic imagination. Although, as Taylor⁴ states in the introduction to these *Lectures*, Bachelard's work resists theorization because of the language he uses for exploring the concept of poetic imagination⁵, Ricœur will find in it a fertile ground for developing his own philosophical thesis around imagination, departing from Bachelard's discussions on this subject, which is, for both authors, based on the use of creative language, instead of on physical perception, and capable of creating newness insofar as it re-describes reality. The matter of reproductive and productive imagination had previously appeared in Ricœur's *Du texte à l'action*, however, the dialogue with Bachelard had not been thoroughly published.

Both Ricœur and Bachelard spend significant energy developing instruments in dialogue with literary texts. While Bachelard defines it as a privileged field for poetic imagination, from *Psychanalyse du Feu* onward; Ricœur discusses literature when speaking of symbolic language, imagination and narrative, in various phases

* “No power of imagination without powerful images”; title extracted from the work by Asger Jorn, 1968.

** All quotations from sources in other languages have been translated by the authors.

¹ This work is partially supported by The São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP), process no. 2024/10394-0, granted to one of the authors.

² Amalric, J.-L., *Paul Ricœur, l'imagination vive : une genèse de la philosophie ricœurienne de l'imagination*, Paris, Éditions Hermann, 2013.

³ Ricœur, P., *Lectures on imagination*, ed. by George H. Taylor and others, Chicago, London, The University of Chicago Press, 2024.

⁴ Taylor, G.H., “Introduction”, in Ricœur, P., *Lectures on imagination*, cit., p. XXVIII.

⁵ Bachelard, consciously opts for this practice once he believes theoretical language cannot handle poetic creation; only poetic language can speak for itself.

of his works. The main reason for this, we argue, is that it is in the works of culture where *poetic language* can arise, where propositions of existential sensibility might come to challenge established knowledge or to produce discoveries based on human existence which renew our perception of reality itself. If, in Bachelard, we may find a latent sense of community behind the idea of *symbolic language*, Ricœur allows us to discuss another premise of culture, one that is, from the beginning, communal, since the text becomes, in his words:

a paradigm of distancing in communication [...], it reveals a fundamental character of the historicity of the human experience, that is, its place as communication *in and through* distance.⁶

This comprehension of communication supposes *ethical* engagement. According to Amalric, even though Ricœur keeps close to literature when discussing *poetic imagination*, his interest focuses on the capacity of certain discourses to exert *action*:

While what Ricœur calls the “poetic imagination” may initially seem to fall within the realm of literary criticism, or a philosophical reflection on poetic productions such as that developed by Bachelard, it can be seen as referring more broadly to the field of poetics: that is, to that descriptive discipline which [...] focuses on the productive character of certain modes of discourse, regardless of the difference between prose and poetry. In this sense, poetics is concerned above all with the productive aspect of symbolism, i.e., its power of invention and creation.⁷

In this spirit we believe these philosophers’ works on language, fiction, imagination, and their ethical implications, when literature is regarded in its social aspects, may be of relevance to contribute to significant contemporary discussions within the field of Literary Studies today, whether it is through the idea of a symbolic understanding of language that deviates from history without denying it⁸, or in overcoming a debate that fluctuates between ontological and epistemological approaches to literature⁹. However, we must take a step back to elaborate on the abovementioned ongoing debate.

In *Sin objeto*¹⁰, Louis offers us a valuable reflection on the status of contemporary Literary Studies, which serves as our starting point. According to the author, roughly from the turn of the century, the field of literature has been challenged by

⁶ Ricœur, P., *Du texte à l'action : essais d'herméneutique II*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, c1986, p. 102.

⁷ Amalric, J.-L., *Paul Ricœur, l'imagination vive : une genèse de la philosophie ricœurienne de l'imagination*, cit., pp. 333-334.

⁸ Costa, C.H., *Símbolo, complexo e mito: o mistério*, “Alea: Estudos Neolatinos”, n. 03, v. 20 (2018), pp. 75-95, p. 21.

⁹ Costa, C.H., *Estudos Literários em questão: paradoxo ou utopia?*, “Alea: Estudos Neolatinos”, n. 03, v. 26, 2024, p. 19.

¹⁰ Louis, A., *Sin objeto: por una epistemología de la disciplina*, 1st. edn., Buenos Aires Colihue, 2022.

social metamorphoses, by the multiplication of critical approaches and methods and by the modification operated *by* the object “literature” *in* the field and *on* itself. This would have led, according to Louis, to a belief in the so called “crisis of literature”¹¹. That is, however, a fallacy; to defend literature, in the name of a career in the discipline or of an abstract historical-social realization, would be to build on the exclusionary and prescriptive values that guide a univocal object, excluding from the field much of what has come to be considered literature, that is, to defend *a* literature.

Nevertheless, Louis continues, these metamorphoses require epistemological reflection to take the discipline out of its drift, to give criterion to the diversity of political claims operationalized in the scope of Literary Studies, encompassing its contradictions. The author claims it is necessary to question the naturalization of literature, which transforms it into an object whose essence is confused with the values of the subject who approaches it, while also originating a skepticism about its power to intervene in reality. To reflect on the statutory qualities of Literary Studies is precisely to consider literature as a mode of knowledge production. This means questioning a series of beliefs about literature that aren’t evident, but historically constructed (literature as data, as cultural renewal, as practical knowledge, counter-knowledge, heuristic force etc.) for the benefit of theorizing about the specificity of literature and the nature of its own knowledge. On the horizon of this speculation, it is possible to glimpse one of the questions that Literary Studies poses today: what is the relationship between literature and society?

This question, for Louis, is based on the constitution of the field. By losing space to disciplines such as History, Anthropology, Sociology, etc. in relation to its objects, the field made its specificity a value. This aspect of the discipline is like a double-edged sword: if, on the one hand, it allows recognizing the discursive specificity of texts of literature, as well as their irreducible political value, encompassing their rich contradictions, on the other hand it strengthens aestheticized and/or depoliticized discourses centered on individuality and *pseudo*-ontologies.

This debate is not new. In a text published in 1979, Iser¹² discusses problems regarding the literary theory of that time. Although he credits literature with a fundamental participation in the humanities in general, the author identifies that the discipline struggles with problems arising from its constitution, for him, motivated by the desire to restore the prestige of literature in the public consciousness¹³. Thus, a sterile pluralism would have originated, from which the different theories could

¹¹ The idea of *crisis* is not exclusive to Literary Studies; in Art History, “crisis” was also commented by Hans Belting (2006) in *The end of art history; a review ten years later*. We can also include in this discussion certain attitudes towards the “end of history” thesis. It can be assumed that this epistemological questioning spreads over the humanities not as a crisis of the objects, but as a crisis of *eurereferenced* thought, or, perhaps, of neoliberal fatalism.

¹² Iser, W., *Problemas da teoria da literatura atual: o imaginário e os conceitos-chave da época*, in Costa Lima, L., (eds), *Teoria da literatura em suas fontes*, Rio de Janeiro, Francisco Alves, 1983. v. 2, pp. 927-953.

¹³ Responding to the inconsistencies and disputing the ideologies of different approaches has been the engine of Literary Studies since its beginning, and such is the nature of the historical

not be put in dialogue, since each method contains a distinct definition of the object that substantiates itself and a specific problem on its horizon. Iser, concerned with responding to the trend in literary theory from which the mediation between literature and society had the effect of “erecting the [social] needs of the moment into prescriptive norms of interpretation”¹⁴, which didn’t effectively need literature to be elaborated, also criticized a certain paroxysm of those who sought to recover the *status* literature had lost within society without questioning what had motivated or should motivate said *status*. A similar criticism is made by Costa, although the purpose of the discussion is different. If Iser thematizes issues related to *aesthetics of reception* and the imaginary as a potential category for Literary Studies, Costa aims to question “normative implication in Literary Studies as a problem situated not in the object of study, but in the subject (in the collective sense)”¹⁵. Reflecting upon the diversity of Literary Studies today, the author wonders how to create generalization strategies without limiting the field, while responding to contemporary issues, and following a guiding principle: it is important to study literature, not for its abstract value, but for its capacity for utopian speculation, in her words,

To regard the studies in the field considering the utopias that govern them or those which they contain is a way of extracting the problem of the constitution of the field from the clutches of the positivist prejudice which states that our choices would be divided between the rationality of a theoretical option and the obscurity of the feeling that makes us choose. Between these two, structuring the field as utopian is making room for a language of cohesion between power and will of which only the creative and mediating imagination is capable.¹⁶

An important current paradox in the discipline can be described as follows: how can one deal with the multiplicity of approaches within the field without falling back on exclusionary positivist dogmatism, in order to give cohesion to the discipline so as not to build up to a condition in which, discursively, “anything goes”? The problem is born, according to the author, from a strategy that aims to denounce underlying ideologies, avoiding the productivity of a dialectical conflict¹⁷; an attitude based on two poles:

On the one hand, aesthetic positions, driven by the difficulty of perpetuating their norms in contemporaneity, and, on the other hand, culturalist positions, characterized by the free and spontaneous ethical refusal of usual aesthetic selection criteria, capable of valuing the quality of works which they themselves wish to promote.¹⁸

update through which every theory must go, however, as already pointed out by Annick Louis, in this field, theoretical speculation and the object are often confused.

¹⁴ *Problemas da teoria da literatura atual: o imaginário e os conceitos-chave da época*, cit., p. 929.

¹⁵ Costa, C.H., *Estudos Literários em questão*, cit., p. 4.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ The author speculates that this issue is motivated by the apolitical individualization of paradigms, however fair their claims may be, which would be a result of the cultural industry and late-stage capitalism.

¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 10.

It is necessary to build a path of epistemic reconciliation between the autonomy of the literary, which is perhaps not so autonomous, and the social, which beyond producing culture, is also *produced* by it. The path proposed by Costa, based on Paul Ricœur, is that of critical hermeneutics. This allows us to recognize, while we avoid the path of prescription or ontological speculation (even if motivated by good-will), the need for an interpretative gesture enriched by conflict, which cannot prosper from the reduction of the opposite angle to ideological reproduction.

This approach to literary and theoretical texts themselves has its cornerstone in the irreducibility of the poetic. To stand before a text is to stand before a proposition of the world, paraphrasing Ricœur. Articulating this speculation with the contradictions that arise from the propositional capacity of the text (from what the text says, as opposed to what it does not say, but that can be said or denounced), is a stance that can help overcome the impasses posed by the irreducibility of ontological positions. In other words, it is about embracing the aesthetic as an experience of otherness¹⁹.

Thus, we can situate the interest of this article by posing the following question: what tools can help us in reading *what the text says*? When treating literature as speculation, as contact between different worlds, as contact with otherness, as communication through distance and time, as *utopia*, one must consider the subject of *imagination*. However, care must be taken when using the term “imagination”, by which we do not refer to its ordinary sense, according to which this activity is directly linked to the creation of surreal images or to the reach for an *over-reality*, this would be a limiting proposal. Imagination here is connected to human creativity, to the act of imagining as a poetic craft.

Bachelard’s *poetic imagination* will, therefore, be important to access the discourse of literary texts, since, according to Costa, delving deeper in the field of symbolic language as a resource for apprehending *poetic imagination* can be a fertile approach for affirming the positivity of culture²⁰. It is not enough to rationalize and reduce the poetic to a *mimesis* of ideological reproduction, it is necessary to understand it as the will of a cultural subject who creates images, who produces symbols of a communal order. Therefore, let us explore *imagination* by articulating the proposals of Ricœur and Bachelard.

2. Bachelard’s poetic imagination and its contribution to literary hermeneutics

Bachelard’s reflections surrounding imagination are deeply rooted in literature and find in literary works the grounds and material for the philosopher’s discussions, therefore, it is not only possible but particularly productive to circle back to literature in order to apply to its current discussions the reflections around imagination which it inspired in the first place. If a dialogue between ethics and literature is not

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ Costa, C.H., *Símbolo, complexo e mito: o mistério*, cit.

directly present in this philosopher's reflections, his ideas surrounding imagination certainly have ethical implications, which can be further developed and applied to current literary theory issues, especially with the help of Ricœur's theoretical tools. It is Bachelard's notion of imagination and its associated concepts, such as the poetic image, material imagination etc., which form the basis for this discussion.

Bachelard proposes a notion of imagination which is antithetical to the ideas of deception, illusion or make-believe. Furthermore, for the philosopher, imagination is also separate from the act of remembering or the ability to reproduce an absent object. Inspired by Bachelard's reflections, Paul Ricœur clearly establishes the difference between *reproductive imagination* (that which evokes the absent object, in which case the image is no more than a trace, a weak presence) and *productive imagination*²¹. Bachelard's *poetic imagination* is precisely an example of this second category. Therefore, diverging from the ideas of illusion, deception and fleeting evocation of an absent object, poetic imagination detaches itself from perception.

It is important to note that, contrary to other theories of imagination, Bachelard's *poetic imagination* is not attached to visual images. To understand this, we may turn to an example, in *Water and Dreams*, where the philosopher discusses the association, in certain literary texts, between the images of lakes and the image of milk. Bachelard argues that the literal and visual elements described by these poets are not enough to make the speaker think of milk, or of objective milk. To justify the conviction of the poet, and the frequency and naturality of such images, one must integrate into the image other components besides the visual. In the images of milk related to the pleasant water of lakes, the *poetic image* is not visual, but sensual, and therefore requires elements of *material imagination* to create meaning and resonate with readers. For Bachelard, then, imagination is not tied to visuality, or, for that matter, to perception itself.

Perceiving and imagining are, for Bachelard, "as antithetical as presence and absence"²². To imagine, he continues, is "to absent oneself, to launch out toward a new life"²³. This departure from perception has, as one can conclude from *Air and dreams*, certain ethical implications, as imagination seems to permit surpassing the limits of oneself and opening possibilities for that which is new. In *Water and Dreams*, Bachelard goes so far as to say that imagination is a "superhuman faculty" and, indirectly referencing Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, suggests that a "man is a man to the extent that he is a superman", and should be defined by the tendencies which "impel him to surpass the human *condition*"²⁴. The ethical role of imagination for Bachelard is evident in this passage, and the liberating

²¹ Ricœur, P., *Du texte à l'action*, cit., p. 216.

²² Bachelard, G., *Air and Dreams: an essay on the imagination of movement*, trans. by Edith R. Farrell and C. Frederick Ferrell, Dallas, The Dallas Institute Publications, 2002, p. 3 [*L'air et les songes. Essai sur l'imagination du mouvement*, Paris, Librairie José Corti, 1943].

²³ *Ivi*, p. 3.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 16.

potency of such faculty may help us reconsider certain problems faced by literary studies, such as the dialectic between ethics and aesthetics.

However, in bachelardian thought, imagination is first and foremost an individual faculty, a “superhuman” but subjective power of newness and liberation. To consider the ethical question in literature, we recognize the need for a step towards collective agency. This step is taken, we believe, by Ricœur’s reading of Bachelard. Before we discuss the ways Ricœur develops bachelardian imagination, guiding it towards ethical engagement, let us explore further the specificity of Bachelard’s notion of imagination hoping to better understand some of the concepts which relate it to human creativity and to literature specifically, such as: material images, literary images, and the culture complex.

Imagination can be divided, according to Bachelard, between *formal* and *material imagination*, although he will later add to these the idea of *dynamic imagination*, responsible for the mobility of images. *Formal imagination* is associated more directly to surface, to ornament. The second is associated by the philosopher with an intimate substance, with “vegetating material powers”²⁵. Although it is impossible to separate them completely, as the image is like a plant that needs both “earth and sky, substance and form”²⁶, the philosopher notes that little attention has been paid to *matter* in aesthetic discussions, which is why he will dedicate the greater part of *Water and Dreams* to *material images*, those *poetic images* which derive directly from matter and its imaginative force, in which the imagination diverts from form and visibility.

Let us remember the example where poets associate the water of calm lakes with images of milk. When discussing the images of “maternal waters”, Bachelard points to poets speaking of calm lakes bathed by moonlight, and the recurrence of the image of “milky waters”. The philosopher notes, however, that for this image to be inspired by visibility, the waters would need to become opaque, and even so, the mere reflection of the moon and its literal whiteness, limited by its shape, would not be enough to create this image, to make poets think of literal milk. The philosopher believes, then, that it is not visibility that creates this recurring image, but material imagination. The image of “milky waters”, then, is an image of warm tranquility, of a “clear and happy matter”. According to Bachelard’s reading,

it is not the world that is bathed in milky moonlight, but the spectator who bathes in a happiness so physical and so reassuring that it brings back memories of the earliest form of well-being, of the most pleasant of foods.²⁷

Material imagination, therefore, connects physical and emotional sensation, creating an image which cannot be explained or reduced to its visual aspect: “Warmth of air, softness of light, and peace of soul are necessary for this

²⁵ *Ivi*, p. 2.

²⁶ *Ivi*, p. 3.

²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 120.

image”²⁸. The color, milk’s visual characteristic, comes afterward, it is deduced, “introduced like an adjective brought along by the substantive, and after it”²⁹. Bachelard’s notion of *material images* is crucial in the comprehension of a theory of imagination that goes beyond the surface of images, integrating different aspects of human experience in the creative process. The exploration of *formal* as well as *material imagination*, and later also *dynamic images* and their transformative power, which make up different aspects of *poetic imagination*, will allow Bachelard to better study poetic creation from a philosophical standpoint. Considering this creative power of poetic imagination can help support an approach of literature in its capacity to autonomously produce change and novelty in reality through language.

Although *poetic images* are, according to Bachelard, a product of human *reverie* and not, necessarily, directly related to the creative process of an artist, insofar as they are produced by any human being who imagines (especially regarding objects of nature), it is precisely in literature that he will find his most productive examples. In *Air and Dreams*, Bachelard references William Blake’s idea that “The Imagination is not a State, it is the Human Existence itself”³⁰ and claims that it is only by systematically studying *literary imagination* that we may understand the veracity of Blake’s words. Although it is only in *Air and Dreams* that Bachelard will discuss the idea of *literary images* as a situated and concrete version of the *poetic image*³¹, his literary indebtedness is stated much earlier, in *Water and Dreams*, where the philosopher explains that most of his examples are taken from poetry because, according to him, “for the time being, in my opinion, the only possible way of illuminating a psychology of the imagination is through the poems it inspires”³². In this same work, Bachelard confesses his literary criticism ambitions, which inject new meanings in some of his concepts:

The choice of literary examples is also due to an ambition, which, finally, I intend simply to confess: if my research is to have any impact, it should contribute some means, some tools for renewing literary criticism. For this reason I introduced the notion of *culture complex* into literary psychology. I have given this name to *prereflexive attitudes* that govern the very process of reflection. In the realms of imagination, these are, for example, favorite images thought to be derived from things seen in the world around us but that are nothing but *projections* of a hidden soul. Culture complexes are cultivated by someone who thinks he is acquiring objectively. The realist, then, chooses *his* reality in reality; the historian chooses his history in history. The poet arranges his impressions by associating them with a tradition.³³

²⁸ *Ivi*, p. 120.

²⁹ *Ivi*, p. 121.

³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 1.

³¹ In order for there to exist a *literary image*, an image created *in* and *for* literature, which is free from rhetorical norms and reductive constructions, it is first necessary for a poetic image to surface in the imagination of the poet.

³² *Ivi*, p. 16.

³³ *Ivi*, p. 17.

For Bachelard, in contrast with psychoanalysis, we must not search for a poetic image's antecedents, for there is no causal relationship between it and "an archetype lying dormant in the depths of the unconscious"³⁴. The poetic image is not, therefore "an echo of the past"³⁵, however, it may *evoke* the past, reverberate it: "through the brilliance of an image, the distant past resounds with echoes"³⁶. The philosopher inverts the order of this supposed causality, suggesting that the poetic image is the creator of its own past, maintaining its orientation towards the future.

The *culture complexes*, related to the *psychological complexes*, are figures that repeat themselves throughout literary and cultural traditions. As an example, the philosopher points to "the poignant charm of a dead woman adorned with flowers and drifting away, like Ophelia, with the flow of the river"³⁷, suggesting that this image, as other *culture complexes*, in its particularity, is not a commonplace, not a stereotype, but repeats itself nonetheless, and would remain obscure if distant from the realm of literature. Unusual images such as this have become, he states, rhetorical figures which remain active in our culture. These complexes may be translated into worn out rhetorical resources³⁸ or, through the individual creativity of a poet, into renewed and sincere *poetic images*: "Used well, the culture complex gives life and youth to a tradition. Used badly, the culture complex is the bookish habit of an unimaginative writer"³⁹.

It is, we argue, the bachelardian notion of *culture complex* that allows for a relationship between the individual creative mind and the collective establishment of myths and symbols. Although the poetic image's central aspect is its novelty ("the poem is essentially an *aspiration toward new images*", claims Bachelard⁴⁰) the culture complex is what allows us to understand how this image can reverberate the symbolic construction of a common past, of a culture, opening up the possibility to consider poetic imagination's relationship not only to the past but to literary tradition and, ultimately, to history.

We may consider imagination's utopic orientation evident in Bachelard's works, as we have seen, considering that the past is echoed in a poetic image, while the poetic image, creator of novelty, remains facing the future. Intuitions of possible ethical and political implications of this idea will be further developed by Ricœur who, by redirecting these notions towards practical action, will be

³⁴ Bachelard, G., *The poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas, Boston, Beacon Press, 1994, p. XVI. [*La poétique de l'espace*, Paris, Puf, 1957].

³⁵ *Ivi*, p. XVI.

³⁶ *Ivi*, p. XVI.

³⁷ Bachelard, G., *Water and Dreams: an essay on the imagination of matter*, trans. by Edith Farrell, Dallas, The Pegasus Foundation, 1983, p. 18 [*L'eau et les rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, Paris, Librairie José Corti, 1942].

³⁸ These are exemplified by the author when discussing the repetition of the swan song in weak rhetoric images.

³⁹ *Ivi*, p. 17.

⁴⁰ Bachelard, G., *Air and Dreams*, cit., p. 2.

able to inject a truly and necessary collective character in the utopic potency of Bachelard's imagination.

3. Ricœur's productive imagination as action

As mentioned, Ricœur's philosophy of imagination owes its foundation to Bachelard. Beyond a gesture of recognition, Ricœur affiliates himself with the reasoning established by the latter regarding imagination as a productive force elaborated *by* and *in* language. After declaring this foundational principle in *Lectures on Imagination*, Ricœur mentions a second principle:

[...] when we start from reproductive imagination, there is already an original, and therefore the main thrust of the analysis is on the negative side. I retreat from the original; all the spontaneity of imagination is exhausted in producing this nothingness alongside reality, in the margin of reality. The imaginary life is more or less described as a flight, as an escape. By contrast, if we start with an image without an original, then we may discover a kind of second ontology that is not the ontology of the original but the ontology displayed by the image itself [...].⁴¹

Continuing, Ricœur will state that through *reverie*, one can hypothesize another life, a utopia. We can already see a ricœurian orientation of bachelardian thought that elevates its consequences to the point where the text can be read as an action; as Ricœur says,

because language is creative, it is echoed in all the deep layers of my existence by a kind of infiltration [...]. To these layers of depth correspond new kinds of relationship to the world.⁴²

Reality is then expanded or challenged by a surprising phenomenon arising from poetic language, an instrument of self-determination, rather than mere reproduction. Thus, we enter the realm of speculation through fiction⁴³. However, one must bear in mind certain caution with the word "ontology". Ricœur does not propose an ontology of "culture" based on an abstract notion of "human", as if "the poetic" came to be its equally subjective manifestations, alternatively, works of culture propose paths of ontological *nature* which expand and defy the reductive and exclusionary categories solidified in culture. This "second level ontology" opposes itself to the one questioned in our introduction.

The *poetic* is, then, as Ricœur puts it, the concern of the being with itself, and with the world by which he is surrounded. Because it addresses a situation of

⁴¹ Ricœur, P., *Lectures on imagination*, cit., p. 231.

⁴² *Ivi*, p. 233.

⁴³ "Poetic language", in neither of these authors' works restricts itself to "poetry" as a genre, the *poetic* is that which *creates*, in whichever form. Restriction according to literary genres has been surpassed by both Bachelard and Ricœur.

existence, literature becomes an instrument for heuristic questioning of the current state of things, the current state of things *as they were*, or the current state of things *as they might come to be*, by a social body of subjects that share a common cultural existence. The use of the present tense here is of significance, as it inserts literary texts in a historical landscape, for it is in the present that an action can take place. This expansion of *productive imagination* into a productive ontology (as its newness can redirect us toward reality instead of the *reproductive imagination's* nothingness) is his strong foundation in Bachelard's work.

Amalric also recognizes the centrality of bachelardian thought for Ricœur's works when defining the conditions for his treatment of imagination in its practical function, but here we can see indications of ethical aspects that had not been put, namely the collective aspect of culture and the methodological principles according to which one can approach a text:

With the symbolic imaginary, on the contrary, we are presented with productions of imagination that both precede and decentralize philosophical reflection, providing it with a pre-understanding of experience on which to build. At the same time, imagination here takes on the face of "objectivity", as man encounters cosmic, dreamlike and poetic symbols that he has not created, and which give themselves to him in a dimension of irreducible facticity. As we have seen, starting from the "fullness of language" and symbols means not only accepting this facticity, but also accepting the cultural contingency of our roots, which means that we come into contact with certain symbols, myths and poetic works rather than others. Because the symbolic imagination is rooted in powers that exceed linguistic articulation, a philosophy instructed by symbols must therefore both assume the facticity and contingency of symbols, and become a hermeneutics, since the constitutive equivocality of every symbol requires deciphering.⁴⁴

As for the collective contingency of culture, Ricœur recognizes that any kind of creation will be inadvertently inserted in *a* history⁴⁵, in a certain comprehension of the being and its surroundings, produced by and accessed through language. This is a foundational turning point for Ricœur, which allows him to elaborate an ethical engagement of the subject by the text, whether we refer to one's native culture or to a globalized notion of culture⁴⁶. In the first sense, we can consider ourselves as participants of a community because of a shared culture, even though one is not able to define its ontology or identity. In the second sense, we are also called to action by the events that are produced by communi-

⁴⁴ Amalric, J.-L., *Paul Ricœur, l'imagination vive : une genèse de la philosophie ricœurienne de l'imagination*, cit., p. 341.

⁴⁵ One must think of "a" history precisely because of each one's cultural contingency.

⁴⁶ Let us not fall for the myth of "cultural purity", which can very rapidly turn to fascism, as history suggests. As Said (2011) shows us, the culture of imperialist nations could only establish itself through colonialism. Repeatedly, this is what post-colonial analysis have demonstrated. Hence, what we name as "native culture" here is the culture in which one is born, with its geographical, cultural and historical contingencies, which include the dynamics established with other communities.

ties in which, *a priori*, we have no direct participation⁴⁷, even though this status is questionable⁴⁸.

As Amalric also demonstrates, this conception of symbolic language and of cultural contingency invariably leads to the matter of *understanding*. Since language exceeds and defies pragmatic meaning, and as the cultural contingency is also a major factor for the comprehension of discourse, the conditions for accessing it must be considered, effort made possible by hermeneutics. This is where Ricœur will help us insert the conditions of production of works of culture in the horizon of a bachelardian conception of *poetic language* and, furthermore, to its conditions of reproduction, also considering the role of the reader in the refiguration of the text in a different horizon. Before delving into the methodological character of Ricœur's hermeneutics, let us comprehend how a text can be understood as an action.

To think of an ethics is to consider the implications of actions and their effects; the social aspect of works of culture is tied to the capacity of a subject to exert action within a community. It is through this lens that Ricœur will conceive the *text as action*. For the author, when a text is written, a discourse (the construction of *meaning* by a historical subject⁴⁹) is made available for collective memory, but, beyond that, a dialogue through culture and through history is made possible, although the original meaning and the objective referential reality are both abolished in the acts of writing and reading. Later, he further develops the connection between text and action; an action, which is intended to operate change in the world, is also there to be interpreted, "it leaves a trace", it is an inscription which allows its re-inscription in other contexts, "action, as a text, is an open work, addressed to an indefinite succession of possible 'readers'"⁵⁰.

Here we can already see the relationship between culture and society Ricœur aims to define, however, he goes further. A literary work is not an action or an inscription of an individual, it is the inscription of a collective subject in the form of a text, it is "the result of a work that organizes language"⁵¹. If the style of a text is the individual's organization of the discourse, the conditions for it to be structured are invariably rooted in culture and are of collective order. For Ricœur, a subject is never a single identity, an individual. To better understand this, we can refer to another ricœurian debate. When questioning Decartes' *Cogito's* foundational value for *identity*, he alternatively proposes that we consider the *self* so

⁴⁷ In a globalized world moderated by media and networks, in which different communities are increasingly intertwined, aren't we called to respond to demands posed by groups which were not participants of our native culture? Images, texts, news, actions etc. call for action, for ethical engagement. This is a good example of the relationship that can be established between texts and ethics.

⁴⁸ Of course, there are issues with this notion of global engagement, namely, how should one act, considering cultural relativity, so as not to project personal values where they are not due, without being demobilized by it?

⁴⁹ Ricœur resorts to Émile Benveniste's works.

⁵⁰ Ricœur, P., *Du texte a l'action*, cit., p. 175.

⁵¹ *Ivi*, p. 108.

strongly implicated by *alterity*, that there cannot be one without the other, *the self* is always implied as *other*⁵². Hence, we can understand *author* and *reader* as collective subjects; they are products of their contingencies as much as they are operators of change in these same contingencies, in direct communication through works of culture:

a narrative [...] belongs to a chain of discourses [*paroles*], through which a community of culture is constituted, and through which this community interprets itself via narrative.⁵³

The above-mentioned inscription of a subject in a regime of historic continuity is mediated and made possible, according to Ricœur, by imagination itself⁵⁴; it is imagination that allows us to “offer ourselves to the ‘effects of history’”⁵⁵. Without further development of the debate established by the author regarding the ideas of *utopia* and *ideology*, we question: if *utopia* is a driving force for producing change and/or hopelessness, and *ideology* a field of dispute that might pulse in the heart of positive change and/or of negative reactionism, how do they resonate socially? It might be precisely through the action of symbolic construction within culture that they are made possible. Although *imagining* is an individual faculty, it does not limit itself to it, *imagining* is an intrinsically collective faculty, it is a foundation of symbolic construction within society and a mediator of action.

Conclusions

As we have discussed in our introduction, Annick Louis poses important contemporary challenges to the field of literature, related to certain social metamorphoses and to the multiplicity of critical approaches. The risk would be, as described by Costa in dialogue with Louis, to fall back on positivist dogmatism as a response to the incohesive multiplicity of approaches in the field today. In order to avoid the pitfall of a discursive “anything goes” in the field of Literary Studies, in which a myriad of critical approaches coexist, one must always turn back to the question “what does the text say?” One must focus on the specificity of the literary text at hand, without losing, however, sight of its relationship to its collective roots and implications, be it in relation to the collective body of a society, be it to the collective aspect of a literary tradition. We believe it is precisely in the delicate balance of this fundamental critical gesture that the tools put forth by Gaston Bachelard and Paul Ricoeur are useful.

⁵² Paul Ricœur, *O si-mesmo como um outro*, trans. by Ivone C. Benedetti, São Paulo, Martins Fontes, 2014 [*Soi-même comme un autre*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1990].

⁵³ Ricœur, P., *Du texte à l'action*, cit., p. 167.

⁵⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 228-236.

⁵⁵ *Ivi*, p. 228.

Bachelard allows us to turn back to the literary text as an autonomous object which is responsible for the creation of new meaning, via the poet's individual creativity and productive imagination. Ricoeur, on the other hand, helps us read the text, itself a dialectical element, through dialectical tools, resituating it in a culture, considering the conflict of interpretations and the contact between the realities which the text connects, through critical hermeneutics. If many critical approaches treat the text as a reminiscence of reality, as an elaboration of a previous structure or reality (in a manner which is analog to the treatment cast on imagination), Ricoeur allows us to see the text as a creation of meaning which has an *ontological nature* (not owing its meaning to a previously established ontology, it points towards possible ways of existing). This is possible precisely because of Ricoeur's reading of Bachelard's productive imagination.

The text is not, therefore, a reminiscence, it creates its own reality which we must access with a critical gesture. In other words, the text does not report to a certain reality, fully accessible to this or that critical paradigm; it is impossible to access reality without considering one's own relative position, to which text and theory serve as periscope. Considering the text as a reality is to consider that the text proposes, via imagination, a reality of second order which may be accessed in the dialogues it allows. Thus, one may bypass the positivist dogmatism as well as the relativism of literary criticism's multiplicity; against these simplifying positions, Ricoeur's step from "text to action" creates the possibility of returning to historical and social reality (a claim supported and demanded by many of the contemporary approaches to literary studies), without leaving the literary text's production of meaning and its capacities to exert action in producing new realities behind.

From this perspective, let us finally refer to the work that names this article. In "*Pas de puis[s]ance d'imagination sans images puis[s]ante[s]*"⁵⁶, a lithography by Asger Jorn, the aphorism and the words are cut and interrupted to fit an indefinite shape, which resembles an overflowing glass. Through a manipulation of matter, the lithography reworks language (whether of the media or of the words themselves), defying the rigidity of the shapes and making room for some wordplay and for the production of new meaning; it reconfigures language to destabilize the referentiality of the spectator (or reader), and of the work itself, in its relation to tradition. The meaning of the sentence is imbued on the shape and, thus, it exceeds its limits and provokes an effect. Hence, it suggests a connection between imagination and *puissance*, which we have interpreted as the capacity to exert action. By doing so, it serves as a standalone statement which synthesizes the ideas we discuss in this article. As we have argued with Bachelard and Ricoeur, *productive imagination* and its *poetic images* have a double force. They allow, in a direct sense, through the experience of contact, to glimpse what had not yet been considered before, or to see with other eyes that which had no

⁵⁶ Jorn, A., *Pas de puis[s]ance d'imagination sans images puis[s]ante[s]*, 1968, in Didi-Huberman, G., (eds), *Levantés*, trans. by Jorge Bastos and others, São Paulo, Edições Sesc, 2017, p. 233.

specific meaning beyond the pragmatic, and, in another sense, they reorient the sensitivity of the community. When the image is strong, when it can access the symbols of culture, it is able to exert action, to influence a historically located construction of subjectivity. *Without powerful images*, which is to say, images that can operate changes on the reader from the symbolic aspects of culture, *imagination is deprived of its strength*. Through the materiality of the work of art, the lithography to which we refer exceeds the mere meaning of the sentence it communicates: the break of words, the disposition of colors, the contrast and organization of the space, and the vertical disposition of word fragments presupposes the *action* of reading, the meaning gains new force: it is, in itself, an example of an *image puissante*. In this sense, the dialogue between Bachelard and Ricoeur continues to be productive in discussions of literary theory today; if the former configures an oneiric principle for approaching the text, the latter makes use of this principle to guide the field to the demands of contemporaneity, namely, the orientation towards ethical commitment to society, maintaining on the horizon the passage from the domain of text to the one of praxis, where one can find an ethics.

Érica Martinelli Munhoz is a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Literary Theory and Comparative Literature at the Faculty of Philosophy, Languages and Literature, and Human Sciences (FFLCH), USP.
erica.munhoz@usp.br

Gustavo Marçon Puppim is a master's researcher in the Department of Literary Theory at the Institute of Language Studies (IEL), Unicamp.
g253689@dac.unicamp.br

Bibliography

- Amalric, J.-L., *Paul Ricoeur : l'imagination vive, une genèse de la philosophie ricœurienne de l'imagination*, Paris, Éditions Hermann, 2013.
- Bachelard, G., *Air and Dreams: an essay on the imagination of movement*, trans. by Edith R. Farrell and C. Frederick Ferrell, Dallas, The Dallas Institute Publications, 2002 [*L'air et les songes. Essai sur l'imagination du mouvement*, Paris, Librairie José Corti, 1943].
- Bachelard, G., *The poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas, Boston, Beacon Press, 1994 [*La poétique de l'espace*, Paris, Puf, 1957].
- Bachelard, G., *Water and Dreams: an essay on the imagination of matter*, trans. by Edith Farrell, Dallas, The Pegasus Foundation, 1983 [*L'eau et les rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, Paris, Librairie José Corti, 1942].
- Belting, H., *O fim da história da arte: uma revisão dez anos depois*, São Paulo, CosacNaify, 2006.
- Costa, C.H., *Estudos Literários em questão: paradoxo ou utopia?*, "Alea: Estudos Neolatinos", n. 03, v. 26, 2024.
- Costa, C.H., *Simbolo, complexo e mito: o mistério*, "Alea: Estudos Neolatinos", n. 03, v. 20, 2018, pp. 75-95.
- Iser, W., *Problemas da teoria da literatura atual, o imaginário e os conceitos-chave da época*, in Costa Lima, L. (eds), *Teoria da literatura em suas fontes*, Rio de Janeiro, Francisco Alves, 1983. v. 2, pp. 927-953.

- Jorn, A., *Pas de puis[s]ance d'imagination sans images puis[s]sante[s]*, 1968, in Didi-Huberman, G., (eds), *Levantes*, trans. by Jorge Bastos and others, São Paulo, Edições Sesc, 2017, p. 233.
- Louis, A., *Sin objeto: por una epistemología de la disciplina*, 1st. edn., Buenos Aires, Colihue, 2022.
- Ricœur, P., *Du texte a l'action : essais d'herméneutique II*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1986.
- Ricœur, P., *Lectures on imagination*, ed. by George H. Taylor and others, Chicago, London, The University of Chicago Press, 2024.
- Ricœur, P., *O si-mesmo como um outro*, trans. by Ivone C. Benedetti, São Paulo, Martins Fontes, 2014 [*Soi-même comme un autre*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1990].
- Said, E., *Cultura e imperialismo*, trans. by Denise Bottmann, São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 2011.
- Taylor, G.H., "Introduction", in Ricœur, P., *Lectures on imagination*, Chicago, London, The University of Chicago Press, 2024.