

Testimonies of Hope: Ricœur's Hermeneutics applied to Works of Lee Bontecou

MARIEKE MAES

In my contribution to the theme *(Con)textual Strategies: Understanding and Interpretation*, I will contemplate two works by Lee Bontecou (1931), with the help of the philosophy and hermeneutics of Paul Ricœur (1913–2005). I will first give an outline of the intention and the aim of Ricœur's philosophy, especially of his hermeneutics. Then, I will look at the work of Lee Bontecou. Finally, I will apply Ricœur's hermeneutics to some, for this essay chosen creations by Lee Bontecou.

Ricœur's Hermeneutics: Reading Texts and other Works of Art

The range of influence of Ricœur's hermeneutics is immense. His hermeneutical methods are applied in several academic disciplines. Besides philosophy, Ricœur's influence is also found in the fields of psychology, law, literary studies, and in biblical and religious studies. In my essay I want to show the applicability of Ricœur's hermeneutics for aesthetics and for works of art.¹

Building on the linguistic theory of Ferdinand De Saussure, Ricœur argues that texts, just as speech does, belong to the category of *events*. Like speech, texts aren't static phenomena, but bear temporal dynamics. In texts, like in spoken word, a dialectic of event and significance occurs, that, in Ricœur's words, reconfigures or recreates the world. Although this happens in both types of events, the differences between speaking and writing are illuminating.

Ricœur recalls the six factors of discourse which Roman Jakobson distinguishes in his essay "Linguistics and Poetics"² and analyses the changes that occur when they are applied to writing and texts: the speaker, the listener, the medium, the code, the situation, and the message. When spoken language becomes writing, the message becomes fixated. This fixation means a change for all the other factors. In analysing the changes in these factors, Ricœur comes to explain what a text really is, and which immense cultural changes are to be attributed to the act of writing: "Thanks to writing man lives in a world and not just in a situation."³

When speaking becomes writing, the speaker becomes the author, which means that a new distance is created between the written message and the writer, and above all, between the author (the 'messenger') and the receiver (the reader):

"The relation between message and speaker at one end of the communication chain and the relation between message and hearer at the other are together deeply transformed when the face-to-face relation is replaced by the more complex relation of reading to writing, resulting from the direct inscription of discourse in *littera*."⁴

This distance between the writer and her, his or their text, changes the character of all the other factors of communication that Jakobson distinguished. In the case of the spoken word, the recipient of the message is the listener, but in the case of the written word, the text, the recipient is the reader. The writer of a text is not per se present when her, his or their text is being read and understood. This new distance between the author and the reader is crucial for the development of the significance of a text. At first sight, this distance may perhaps seem to be an obstacle for the just understanding of the text's message. Because the author is not per se present, the text is not protected against misinterpre-

tation in a direct manner. This possibility for abuse of a text was one of the reasons for Plato, to name one, to mistrust writing.

Ricœur acknowledges Plato's critique, as that of Rousseau, and sees the dangers of orphaned texts. But to Ricœur, these critiques form the basis of an even stronger plea for writing. For Ricoeur, the distance between author and reader is actually *productive*: because of their different situations and contexts a "productive distanciation" emerges.⁵ Together with the aforementioned criticisms of writing, the rather embarrassing critique of art developed by Plato in his *Republic* is Ricœur's starting point for developing his own theory of the status of the text. And he does this with the help of that same Plato. In *Phaedrus* Plato compares texts to objects of art. Plato says there that art constitutes a lower order of being, because it can only reflect the assumed *Ideas*, which are themselves the only basis for reliable knowledge. Ricœur, of course, renounces Plato's art criticism, but he retains the insight that it is important to examine the ontological status of art and, in part thanks to Plato, links the status of art objects to that of texts. For this, the work of François Dagognet *Écriture et iconography*⁶ is illuminating. In line with Dagognet, Ricœur compares texts to icons. And icons are not a diminution of reality, but an "iconic augmentation".⁷

"Iconicity is the re-writing of reality. Writing, in the limited sense of the word, is a particular case of iconicity. The inscription of discourse is the transcription of the world, and transcription is not reduplication, but metamorphosis."⁸

In this comparison of texts and works of art, we find a wonderful justification for applying Paul Ricœur's hermeneutics to works of art. But in order to clarify the possibility of applying Ricœur's hermeneutics to Lee Bontecou's work, I will first need to say a little more about Ricœur's hermeneutics and its relationship to philosophical anthropology.

Anthropology and Hermeneutics in Ricœur's Philosophy

To better clarify the relevance of Ricœur's hermeneutics to *(Con)textual Strategies: Understanding and Interpretation*, we need to examine the relation between hermeneutics and anthropology in Ricœur's oeuvre. Ricœur's oeuvre covers more than seventy years of intensive philosophical thinking and writing. To his early work, the studies of Jean Nabert were important. The encounter with Nabert's work laid the basis of Ricœur's philosophical anthropology. According to Jean Nabert, being human means to be involved in the dynamics of the original affirmation of being and a longing for being. Especially in his *Éléments pour une éthique* Nabert gives a profound explanation of this original affirmation and longing for being.⁹ Original affirmation is here described as the origin of the Self and of self-consciousness:

"Being of the self can only exist by self-consciousness that is acquired by an affirmation that generates and renews this consciousness."¹⁰

The insights of Nabert belong to what is now called *Reflexive Philosophy*. A fundamental insight of Reflexive Philosophy is that human beings can only appropriate their identity through the detour of interpretation. Human life is drawn and motivated by a longing for meaning. This longing demands of a person to appropriate one's own being, to affirm to oneself that one's *being there* matters or is worthwhile. That one's existence is not entirely contingent. This appropriation becomes only possible through the detour of interpretation: by interpreting yourself and one's actions, other people, works of art and literature, one gains insight into who and what one can be or become. In short, these insights of Jean Nabert form the starting point of Ricœur's hermeneutics.

Besides Nabert, there are of course many other thinkers that were important for Ricœur's development. Also worth mentioning is Gabriel Marcel, as inspiring example of the practice of philosophy as a way of life and because of his particular attention to important philosophical problems, such as: the free will, hope and promise. Important too, was Karl Jaspers with his theory of ciphers. These thinkers especially, prepared the way for Ricœur's hermeneutics.

Ricœur's first study that can be seen as *hermeneutical* is part three of the *Philosophy of the Will, Symbols of Evil*.¹¹ Bot Jasper's and Naberts influence on Ricœur's work can here especially be found in the investigation of symbols and in his approach of evil. Evil is dark, impenetrable, and thus – in Ricœur's words – defies philosophical and theological thought. Without the use of symbols, there would be no possible way to articulate human experience with and of evil: Being polluted, being lost, carrying a burden – typical symbols of shame, sin and guilt – give us an insight in divergent forms of consciousness of evil.¹² Without the interpretation of these symbols of evil, we would not be able to achieve any insight in ourselves. Self-consciousness is awakened by these specific symbols. And the symbols of evil always point to ways out of evil too: to ways of liberation, redemption and of atonement. They are joined, according to Ricœur, by symbols of hope: Hope to be washed and become cleansed, hope to come home again and to be liberated of the burden. According to Ricœur, the symbols of evil make possible that the longing for being is motivated by hope.

After his *Philosophy of the Will*, Ricœur published: *Freud and Philosophy, An Essay on Interpretation*.¹³ In this essay Ricœur confronts himself more systematically with the questions of hermeneutics and the problems of language. Ricœur herein agrees with Freud's adage: 'the human being is not master of his own house'. But he disagrees with Freud's position that man is moved solely by instincts, drives and compulsions.

However, the confrontation with Freud's work opened for Ricœur the way to several new studies on language and hermeneutics. For instance, questions of interpretation form an important part of the three volumes of *Time and Narrative*.¹⁴ *Time and Narrative* is a thorough study of the relations between literature and the formation of identity. *Time and Narrative* is strongly connected to *Oneself as Another*¹⁵, a study of philosophical anthropology. The connection I am aiming for here, is the notion of a *narrative identity* – which means that identity is not based upon a stable, imprescriptible fundament, but rather upon *attestation*. By that I intend that the identification of others and of ourselves is not done by any direct and clear insight into who and what a person *is*, but rather is a question of conjecture and belief. In other words: we are telling others and ourselves stories of ourselves and others, hoping to be able to appropriate, *grasp* their meaning. We intend to become what we tell and hope to believe, or to become convinced of what we say. Literature and art are the great resources for the stories we tell in order to find significance. This means that art and literature are indispensable for the narrative of human identity.

Again, the main questions in *Oneself as Another* are: What does identity mean? Where is identity based on? What is individuality? Who or what is a person? What does it mean when we impute a deed to a person? Ricœur cannot agree with the position of Descartes, to whom the Self is an unshakable and untouchable foundation – nor with the position of Nietzsche, for whom the Self is merely illusion. The lasting influence of Jean Nabert can be found especially in the last chapter of this particular study, where Ricœur states that the Self is appropriated by detours of interpretation and in encounters with the (O)other.

Ricœur describes identity in *Oneself as Another* as a dialectic between *idem* and *ipse*. By *idem* is intended: *what is formed* by identifiers such as the date and place of birth, someone's parents, and ones DNA. The empirical and historical 'facts'. The *ipse* consists of the stories that can be told about this *idem*, in which one can recognize or find oneself. Ricœur calls this dialectic of *ipse* and *idem* the narrative identity. Telling a story is *mimesis of action*, Ricœur states. To clarify this, we must have a look at *The Myth of Sisyphus*, as it was retold by Camus.¹⁶ Human action is intended as meaningful, which is beautifully illustrated in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In this myth is told how the gods wanted to punish Sisyphus, and they do so by forcing him to do heavy, but meaningless work. (Of course, Camus may well have concluded that life has no meaning, but to me his *The Myth of Sisyphus* shows an entirely other outcome... It is a matter of interpretation.) Human action is intentional and to be forced to do meaningless work thus is torture. And the intended significance is told, examined and explained in stories. These stories form the fabric of the narrative identity. To be able to develop a

narrative identity, we are in need of art and literature. Human beings must appropriate themselves and art and literature are the privileged ways to be able to do that. To clarify this further, Ricœur then distinguishes prefiguration, configuration and refiguration. By prefiguration Ricœur intends the openness of human reality to storytelling. Configuration, to Ricœur, is the act of bringing together the diverging multiplicity of reality in time: to condense it into an intrigue and a plot. Refiguration, means the recreation of reality by the significance that is revealed by this process.

Ricœur's conclusion in *Oneself as Another* is that the epistemological and ontological status of human being can be described as the already mentioned attestation, testimony. Human identity, Ricœur argues there, is something that needs to be testified. Attestation is a type of belief, a possible way of seeing. It is not an unshakable principle or a truth, but it is neither a nothing, nor an illusion – as for instance Nietzsche, and more recently David Parfit, asserts. Ricœur:

“Attestation is the assurance of being oneself acting and suffering. Attestation is always vulnerable and threatened, especially by suspicion. Suspicion is the specific contrary of attestation. Suspicion for instance in the reliability of my given word. The kinship between attestation and testimony is found here. True testimony is contrasted by false testimony. “There is no true testimony without false testimony.”¹⁷

What is at stake here, is being *human* – being an *I*. That, what Heidegger named as: *Dasein* (*being there*). The way of being of *Dasein* is attestation, testimony. There is a kinship between attestation and testimony. Giving testimony asks of us to become a reliable witness. A witness of what? Of course, nowadays witnesses are asked about the eventualities in human life, under specific circumstances: in a Court of Law. But on a more general level, I would say: we are all asked to bear witness to human life. What is or was it all about? What is or was its meaning?

Lee Bontecou: Two Pieces

After this brief detour in the development of Ricœur's work, it now becomes an interesting challenge to confront Ricœur's philosophy with some particular works from the *œuvre* of the American artist Lee Bontecou. Especially because, as we have seen, Ricœur's anthropology and metaphysics include the value, and what is more: the necessity, of art for the project of being human. Art can be understood as the attestation of significance in human existence. What then, is attested of in the art of Lee Bontecou? Which stories, insights and ideas can be told by, with and in the work of Lee Bontecou? To what does her work bear witness?

In her essay, with the ominous title: *Against Interpretation*, Laura Stamps gives a clear overview of the life and work of the American artist Lee Bontecou.¹⁸ In 1956, Lee Bontecou received a Fulbright Scholarship, and this made possible for her to stay in Rome until 1958. It was there that she came into contact with old Greek and Etruscan art – and with modern, European art. But she also experienced the Post-War atmosphere in Rome and met with the traces of the disasters of The First and Second World Wars, and the inconceivable amount of human suffering that these had caused. It seems safe to say that these experiences must have left a deep impression in her. Bontecou rarely gives interviews and so we may find the *productive distanciation* that is necessary to interpret her work autonomously. In Bontecou's early work we find sculptures made of canvas, steel and rags. Materials that were reshaped in fascinating ways. The materials, colours, and construction forms, I associate with personal memories of my visits to the Nazi concentration camps, in particular: of Theresienstadt. I recognize in these early sculptures the colours and shades of the tarnished barracks, of the mud and literally: of the rags. This impression is reinforced by the use of soot in the sculptures. Soot reminds us directly of the exhaust of industry, machinery and of the crematoria. In these early sculptures, which are often huge constructions, always one or more black holes can be found, around which the composition is centred. These black holes are especially ominous, as their blackness is impenetrable.

In later years however, from the 1980s to the 1990s, Bontecou started constructing very subtle mobiles. Entirely different in character: flying objects that are moved by air movements. Just as in

the early sculptures, only restrained colours were applied: the colours of sand and stones. To me, there exists a significant relationship between the early sculptures and the later mobiles. To explain this relation, we will now take a closer look upon two specific pieces, one sculpture that Bontecou created when she was young – and a mobile that originated in her later days.



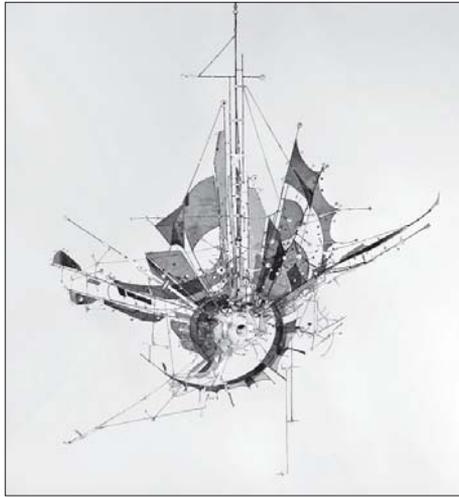
Source: Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

The first piece we will contemplate is: *Without Title* (1961), which is in the collection of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. It is a construction of 136 x 188.5 x 37cm consisting of canvas, parchment, steel, and soot. The colours are different grades of brown, grey, broken white and black. When confronted with it, the eye is drawn towards three oval, intensely black holes. The form and colours of the construction, together with the intensity of the black of the holes, make me think of, besides the aforementioned concentration camps, the bunkers on the beaches of the Atlantic Coast. I remember being fascinated by these bunkers as a child, when playing on the beach. These bunkers appeared as ominous constructions, partly hidden by the sand. They are witnesses of war, of threat and suffering amidst the insouciance of summer holidays. The black holes in Bontecou's construction evoke specific memories of stopping at the entrance of a bunker on such a bright and warm, sunny holiday, and looking down into its, cold, intense darkness. The darkness of what it holds inside, of the history that it holds back. But the holes in the Bontecou piece also evoke associations with the exhaust pipes, that I mentioned earlier. The whole construction thus becomes a concentration of the many evils of modernity and the history of the twentieth century. Contemplating this object and engaging with it, the black holes start to feel like pupils that see the observer and wait, ask even, for a response. And so, these holes remind me of the famous description of *the Holy* by Rudolf Otto, *tremendum ac fascinans* – they are terrifying and fascinating.

Among the used materials in the construction is also parchment, and this opens another dimension of significance. Parchment is the material where upon, since ages ago, was written. For instance: the Torah. Parchment is durable. Parchment was used to carry letters, words, texts: it was the carrier of meaning and significance. On parchment histories were written down, to carry them through time to next generations. Parchment is made of the skins of animals. And the relation with skin takes us back to the concentration camps of WW II in an eerie way. Where people were stripped naked to be murdered. Where one could not save one's own skin and where both the misery of the victims, and the inconceivable evil of the perpetrators, gets deep under your skin.

The work consists of different forms. We find organic, round forms, such as of pebbles – and the more rectangular forms of for instance driftwood. Especially the driftwood-like forms are both metaphorically and literally reminiscent of homelessness and thus reinforce the aforementioned relations with the disasters of the industrial and mechanicalized modernity and the World Wars. So, the whole work is multidimensional and reveals divergent and particular meanings of being human and living in recent history. It reminds us too of the famous words in Deuteronomy from the Torah: "My father was a wandering Aramaean" (Deut. 26:5). Of wandering migrants. Bontecou's work

seems to be an appeal to not forgetting that. The symbols of evil, which Ricœur described in his aforementioned study, are here condensed into this work of art. The pollution of soot, the being lost in the forms and colours of driftwood and cobbles, the ominous black holes that seem to observe the observer and ask for a response.



Source: Kunstmuseum Den Haag.

The next creation from Bontecou we shall engage with is: *Without Title* (1996), a mobile constructed from steel, silk, porcelain, and thread. It is part of the collection of Kunstmuseum, the Hague. The applied colours are reminiscent of the colours in the work that we looked at first. Again: brown, grey and white - but here, also a warmer ochre. The effect on the spectator however, is entirely different. This is in part, due to the implementation of another material than parchment: silk. This material makes the colours here transparent and shiny, instead of opaque and dull. The black holes are still present, but now merely as the tiny holes in white, porcelain beads. This object causes a totally different effect than the piece we contemplated firstly. Since this piece is not mounted on a wall, but a mobile, pending in the air, its qualities are reminiscent of flying. This relates to heavenly creatures, such as birds and butter- or dragonflies. Perhaps even a relation towards angels may be justified: heavenly creatures that often announce good tidings of joy. But the work reminds us also of sailing ships, moved by air. The entire *creature* evokes feelings of lightness, movement and therefore perhaps of hope. It appears to possess the ability to move and to travel, and thus causes feelings of expectation and desire. Something good might happen. Something good, not evil, since the shapes are light and elegant: airy. Because of this, the piece forms a symbol of hope.

Christian Wiman writes about his experiences with the work of Lee Bontecou as follows:

“...part of what is so moving about her work is the sense of enclosed and solitary suffering that is slowly transfigured through the decades (you feel it underneath the social suffering, feel a single existential being struggling for meaning in the midst of immense, meaningless, inchoate, and seemingly all-controlling social and historical pressures). ... and then, still very much in the desert (the fact of emptiness, of absence, undergirds the assertions of the late work), a revelation comes: we walked into a room filled with large, delicate, astonishingly complex mobiles that hung from the ceiling – like sea creatures or dream creatures; we knew, at any rate, that we were suddenly in another element. And could breathe.”¹⁹

The two ‘creatures’ we have now examined, reflect indeed the quoted words of Christian Wiman. Solitude, suffering, longing for meaning, but they also form an appeal to the world. The first piece reflects a prophetic severity, with its dark holes and its parchment and steel. The second piece, with its silk wings and its lightness, is a witness of hope - liberated as it seems from the burden of gravity.

Conclusion

This brief encounter of the philosophy of Ricœur and works by Lee Bontecou, teaches us something worthwhile. In the work of Bontecou we may recognize qualities that relate to the ambiguity of human existence: the darkness and the despair coupled to a longing for joy, love, peace – and most of all: the longing for meaning and significance. That the hardship and difficulties, the hurt, is not meaningless. That what is suffered is witnessed and taken notice of. We may recognize in these works some of the particular themes to which Ricœur devoted his philosophical practice right from the beginning, when he chose Nabert's description of the dialectic of an original affirmation of existence and a longing for being as starting point. What does it mean to *be* a human *being*? Both the work of Bontecou and of Ricœur remains motivated by hope, which results in the eventual, beautiful mobiles from Bontecou and various, wonderful texts by Ricœur on love, justice, and existence as a form of attestation. In Bontecou's works we may recognize the attestation of both despair and hope.

What do we see, when we have a closer look at the above-described objects by Bontecou and interpret them with the hermeneutical methods that Ricœur has developed? Both the chosen objects, the relief/wall construction and the mobile, find their significance within the entirety of Bontecou's oeuvre. We hereby can see between the two of them, a specific development in the language of forms over the years. The forms as such, as they are (half or entirely) spatial, remind us that there is more than just one perspective possible. And because they can, and even *need* to be seen from different angles, they are literally witnesses of the interpretability of reality as such. Bontecou's creations reveal their meanings within the horizon of the world where they were created in and from. They are witnesses of a not long ago, but bygone, historical world that bears the wounds and scars of war and crimes against humanity. A world that also bears the negative consequences of industrialization and mechanisation for the humane. Like us, human beings, the works find their significance in their historical development and context of origin.

But, as we have seen, these works are not just witnesses of despair, but also of hope. (In her later days Lee Bontecou also made *sandboxes* wherein she assembled objects of beauty, that appear to have met by coincidence, like things that wash up on the beach. But this contingency is here reshaped, into an intentional, meaningful structure.) Bontecou brought together different phenomena of reality in her work. As such, it is a good example of Ricœur's three forms of *mimesis*: the prefiguration, configuration and refiguration (in *Time and Narrative*). At first: reality invites, makes possible to do the work of *mimesis*, prefiguration. In the configuration of its construction, the first object we have examined testifies of the cruelty of war and the dangers of industrialization. But this testimony is at once a refiguration of reality. It shows the possibility of *seeing* from more than one perspective. In its particular configuration the piece reshapes aspects of reality and so enriches them with meaning and significances. The intensely black holes may obviously be interpreted as symbols of darkness, of all evil. But at the same time, they form an invitation to act, to come into action against evil: because there is, can and must be hope. The piece turns its spectator into an actor. It asks of the contemplator: do you see this darkness? What will you do about it? Will you flee? Will you fight? Will you bear witness to it? The piece shows that it remains possible to come in action. For the sake of justice and love. For the sake of life. Especially the mobile form – in itself a witness of movement, of action and thus of possibility – motivates the intention of hope.

*School of Theology and Religious Education,
Fontys University, Utrecht, The Netherlands*

Notes

- ¹ For an explanation of Ricœur's hermeneutics, I will especially concentrate on the essays "Speaking and Writing" in: Paul Ricœur, (1976) *Interpretation Theory* and: "What is a Text", originally in: Paul Ricœur, *Du texte à l'action*.
- ² Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics" in: T.A. Sebeok (red.) *Style in Language*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1960. p. 247-324.
- ³ Paul Ricœur, *Speaking and Writing*, p. 36.
- ⁴ Paul Ricœur, *Speaking and Writing*, p. 29.
- ⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Speaking and Writing*, p. 43.
- ⁶ François Dagognet, *Écriture et iconographie*, Vrin, Paris, 1973.
- ⁷ Paul Ricœur, *Speaking and Writing* p. 40.
- ⁸ Paul Ricœur, *Speaking and Writing*, p. 42.
- ⁹ Jean Nabert, *Éléments pour une éthique*, Paris: Presse Universitaires de France, 1943.
- ¹⁰ Jean Nabert, *Éléments pour une éthique* p. 58: "L'être du moi ne peut naître que de la compréhension qu'il acquiert de soi par une affirmation qui l'engendre et le régénère."
- ¹¹ Paul Ricœur, *La symbolique du mal*, Paris, Aubier Montaigne, 1960.
- ¹² For an outline of Ricœur's *Symbols of Evil* see: Marieke Maes, "Paul Ricœur: Symbols of Good and Evil in History, the Bible and our Time". In: *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*. Vol. 12. No. 4. 2020 p. 161-174.
- ¹³ Paul Ricœur, *De l'Interprétation. Essay sur Freud*. Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1965, English translation: Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy. An Essay on Interpretation*, Yale University Press, 1977.
- ¹⁴ Paul Ricœur, *Temps et Récit*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1983, 1984, 1985.
- ¹⁵ Paul Ricœur, *Soi même comme un Autre*. Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1990.
- ¹⁶ Albert Camus, *Le mythe de Sisyphe*, Paris, Gallimard, 1942.
- ¹⁷ Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 22. Charles Reagan, 'Personal Identity'. p. 7.
- ¹⁸ Stamps, L, "Against Interpretation." In: *Lee Bontecou. Hannibal*, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, 2017. p. 10-21.
- ¹⁹ Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss. Meditation of a Modern Believer*. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1913. p.150.

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