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The Gift

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Ricœur, Gift and Poetics

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ABSTRACT

In Ricœur's last works, we can find what he calls a poetics of love. Choosing the "dialectic" path of a comparison between love and justice, Ricœur claims that justice lies in the rule of equivalence (give to each his own); the disorientation of love, instead, suspends the return, the equivalence, the exchange. Love does not say: "do ut des", but rather (if we can transform the expression) it says "do ut dem", to offer without expecting anything in return: this is what Ricœur calls a "first gift". However, it is an expectation that is always open to the possibility of a "surprise": the surprise of a "second first gift" able to fulfill the gratuity of the original act of donation. This essay questions this possibility of "mutual gift".

Keywords: gratuity; justice; love; Ricœur; surprise.

1. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

In Ricœur's last works, we can find what he calls a *poetics of agape* or even more simply a *poetics of love* (Ricœur, 1996, pp. 23-40). Ricœur is aware of the risks underlying the decision to use this term (love), but also conscious of the fact that poetry does not have others, more appropriate to express the tension of his desire.

"Talking about love may be too easy, or rather too difficult. How can we avoid simply praising it or falling into sentimental platitudes?" (Ricœur, 1996, p. 23). How not to fall into exaltation or emotional banality? How to talk about the poetry of love, without, in so doing, writing a poetry, becoming a Poet? Ricœur chooses the "dialectic" path of a comparison between love and justice: "here by dialectic I mean, on the one hand, the acknowledgment of the initial disproportionality between our two terms

and, on the other hand, the search for practical mediations between them – mediations, let us quickly say, that are always fragile and provisory” (p. 23).

Of this dialectic (Caputo, 2008) we only want to consider the crux: what does it mean to say that *love is poetry* (Caputo, 2013, pp. 231-256)?

2. THE HYPER-ETHICAL LANGUAGE OF LOVE

Emphasizing the link between love and poetry means, above all, remembering that love *speaks*, but it speaks a language that is *different* from the ordinary language of everyday life, logic and prose. The poetry of love is primarily a poetry of “praise”¹.

From the uniform grey of everyday objects, from the anonymity of the everything, in which everyone is equal to everyone else, the “poet” (metaphorically speaking), i.e. the lover sees a gaze emerge that says: *Love me!* And of this appeal – so different from the imperative, but also from normal description of what it is – he decides to make poetry. An uncanny use of the imperative form (Hall, 2007), that can be understood – in its “scandalous” role – only starting from the link that precedes it. In a way, it is not the beloved who says *Love me!*, nor his/her lover, but love itself.

The commandment to love is love itself, commending itself, as though the genitive in the “commandment of love” were subjective and objective at the same time. (Ricœur, 1996, p. 27)

Love can not be *commanded*. It is *recommended*. “Allow yourself to feel loved!”. In fact, the language of love is able to awaken the primeval beauty in things and in others. His speaking is a new creation that says: “Let it be!”. It projects the self beyond itself. That is why an authentic “poetic” relationship can never be written by one person. Praise attracts praise. Poetry attracts poetry. The offering of oneself, the gift attracts the gift (Wall, 2005, pp. 130-136).

Then, where is the difference between the lover and the “merchant” (this is the word used by Ricœur: 2005)? It is again a question of language, of style. The poet “gives”, but his gift is not one of the market, it is not an exchange. It is the “hyperethical feeling” (Ricœur, 1996, p. 33) of a broad economy of the gift, which has quite different forms of expression than the forms with which men justify their actions. It is not the norm of daily “prose”. It is the exception of the gesture that oversteps normal-

¹ In several passages Ricœur connects this *poetry of praise* to the hymn. See, in particular, *The Hymn to the Charity* of Paul of Tarsus, 1 Cor. 13.

ity, to return it to its original momentum. In this sense, love is always illogical. Its logic is “different”, “poetic”. In fact, it cannot be enclosed in grammatical, syntactical, or stylistic rules. We can try to explain a poem “logically”, but – even assuming that we can understand it – in schematizing it we reduce it, we remove its fingernails, we prevent it from having on us the impact that its linguistic and conceptual distortion wanted to have. This is the economy of the gift, in the poetics of love: “it develops a logic of superabundance that, at first glance at least, opposes itself to the logic of equivalence that governs everyday ethics” – writes Ricœur in *Love and Justice* (Ricœur, 1996, pp. 33-34)².

In relation to this “logic of superabundance”, even more radically, in *The Course of Recognition*; I believe it is possible to consider *Parcours* as a last phase of Ricœur’s thinking, beyond those usually proposed by scholars (Greisch, 2001; Agis Villaverde, 2006). Ricœur says that superabundance is not even a *logic*. It is an *A-logic*. And mind you: Ricœur does not contrast the love-poetry only with the “logic” of violence or that of mercantilism, or liberal individualism, but more radically he also contrasts love with the “logic” of justice, which – even if it were a perfect prosody – would never reach the heights of the hymn of praise.

In fact, even the best justice lies in the rule of equivalence. *Give to each his own* is the classic formula that unites the just to the equal. And it is “logical” that it be so. It would be impossible to live in a world in which the equivalence of equality did not support social and legal constraints.

The philosophy of Ricœur is neither subversive, nor a-moral. It pushes morals to “give more”. In fact, man is not only a *rational animal*, nor even just a *political animal*, but – just for this reason – he is also a *poet* of the hyper-ethical. Man not only needs to be *recognized as an “each”*, the same as all others (in social practices, judicial systems, governmental institutions, distribution of goods), but also, and even more fundamentally, he needs to be *recognized as the “beloved”*, as a “You” different from all other selves (chosen for his uniqueness and singularity). In this sense, just as love can never supplant and eliminate the need for justice, the prose of justice can never level love’s poetic yearning (Theobald, 1995; Garapon, 2006; Ponce de Leão, 2006). The poetry is a gamble that raises man from the horizontal logic of reciprocity, from the quietist dimension of the equivalence, to the disorienting economy of superabundance.

“*To disorient* without reorienting is, in Kierkegaardian terms – Ricœur points out – *to suspend the ethical*. In one sense, the commandment to love,

² For Ricœur, the “crazy” apex of this love is to love our enemies, as is proposed in the evangelical *agape*.

as hyperethical, is a way of suspending the ethical [...]” (Ricœur, 1996, p. 37; emphasis added).

The disorientation of love suspends the return, the equivalence, the exchange. “Love” does not say: *do ut des*, but rather (if we can transform the expression) it says *do ut dem*. I give because I must give. “To offer without expecting anything in return”: this is a “first gift” (*premier don*). “Une générosité [...] sans égard pour l’obligation ainsi engendrée de donner en retour: générosité libérée des règles d’équivalence régissant les relations de justice” (Ricœur, 2005, p. 337).

The gap, the jump is from the logic of the market (including the fairest market) to the “sans prix” (Hénaff, 2002), that is the “without-price” of poetry: in-utility, anti-market. Here Ricœur, inevitably – as a philosopher – can not but remember the *pricelessness* of philosophy, much akin in its in-utility to the anti-market of poetry (Ricœur, 2005, pp. 339-341). There are, Ricœur points out, things that can not be bought and sold. One of these is the poetic experience (and the artistic experience, in general). Another of these is thought and its freedom, its ability to challenge, provoke, and criticize what exists.

“Le spectacle qu’offre l’histoire est celui d’une défaite croissante du sans prix, refoulé par les avances de la société marchande”. But there are oases of resistance in which the *non-tradable* “remains” in its specificity of “without price” (Ricœur, 2005, pp. 343-344).

Love, returning to the poet, is without price. This “saves” the gift of the poet, distinguishing it from that of the merchant. In this case, “I give” is a surplus: an superabundance that, however, is not closed in on itself, but responds, in turn, to a previous overabundance and calls again, in a circle, for further overabundance. This is what protects the poetics of love from the risk of the detachment of superiority. To the masters of suspicion, who insinuate doubt (... this *gift* is not a gift, but *poison* because it crushes the other in a debt that can never be reciprocated and which harms his dignity; Ricœur, 2000, p. 621. On this subject, distinguishes two phrases in Ricœur’s writings from the 1960s: “masters of suspicion” and “hermeneutics of suspicion”; Scott-Bauman, 2009, p. 58), the poet responds with the fragility of his desire, a desire that Ricœur, in a strong and original manner, called “optative”.

3. THE OPTATIVE OF MUTUALITY

The poet is a man of the optative: “ce mode qui n’est ni descriptif ni normatif” (Ricœur, 2005, p. 354), but a desiderative mode. For the poet,

I want does not mean that *it must be so*. It means “I would like it to be so”: a tightrope between *what it is* and *what I would like it to be*. The poetic form of “love me!” is not a “command”. It is the “desire” that the other might experience the beauty of the priceless gift of self, and – in turn – become a poet of praise (not an insolvent debtor). Ricœur writes: from the *do ut des* to the “I give so that (*pour que*) you give” (Ricœur, 2005, p. 355). But this “so that”, this *pour que* can only be *optative*.

Perhaps, to be less ambiguous than the Ricœurian expressions may seem, the poet should say: “I give ... I would like for you to give, too”; “I gave you a gift ... I would like for you to do the same”. Even more radically, the lover should not even say *Love me!*, but he should say, *Love!*, where the emphasis is once again on “You” and not on “I”. In fact, the desire of the giver, if it is really superabundant, it is not even *that you could love me*, but *that you can love*. If the object of the love of the “You” becomes a third party (not me), this does not make the giving of the You less worthy, nor would the gratuity be less abundant, nor would the movement of mutual disclosure be less effective.

Although, in the poetic optative, hope remains, hidden, non-invasive: the hope that you can, with your poetry, respond to mine; that your superabundance may actually address my desire for you. In this sense, the possible reciprocity, is not, would not be exchange, but mutual recognition, mutuality (*mutualité*). Reciprocity, Ricœur points out, “tourne au-dessus de nos têtes”; mutuality “circule entre nous” (Ricœur, 2005, p. 355). In mutuality there is no “exchange” of gifts, understood as “something” that objectively passes from one to another and from another to one. There is no horizontality of the “right” reciprocity (on the same level). There is the asymmetry of a dual superabundance, because the interest-free gift each time falls from a gap in altitude, from the height of pricelessness (p. 366). Marcel Henaff (2004, pp. 326-337) defines “reciprocity” as the way in which Ricœur breaks the Cartesian circle of egology.

“La générosité du don suscite non pas une restitution, qui, au sens propre, annulerait le premier don, mais quelque chose comme la réponse à une offre. À la limite, il faut tenir le premier don pour le modèle du second don, et penser, si l’on peut dire, le second don comme une sorte de seconde premier don” (Ricœur, 2005, p. 350). It is a fragile mutuality, as fragile as the identities on which it is based, and as “fragile” as the poetic thread that supports it.

For this reason, every authentic gift is a “risk”. One assumes the risk of being rejected, of not being recognized, not being accepted, appreciated. You accept the possibility of misunderstanding and ingratitude. For this reason, every authentic gift is an expectation: “attente, qui peut être indé-

finiment différée, voire perdue de vue et franchement oubliée”. However, it is an expectation that is always open to the possibility of a “surprise”: the surprise of this “second first gift” able to fulfill the gratuity of the original act of donation (Ricœur, 2005, p. 351). For this reason, every authentic gift is “un espace d’espérance”, “une onde d’irradiation et d’irrigation qui, de façon secrète et détournée, contribue à l’avancée de l’histoire vers des états de paix”: is the hidden counter-current in the history of violence. For this reason, each authentic gift “est [...] ce qu’est par ailleurs l’hymne au plan verbal” (p. 354), it is the poetry of the optative: gratuity that evokes gratitude and gratitude that evokes new gratuity (Olivier Abel speaks of a “reconnaissance inquiète”: Abel, 2004, pp. 45-57). It is (Kemp, 2006; Villela-Petit, 2007) *reconnaissance!* The French language is one of those where “gratitude” can also be said with the word “recognition”. There is no construction of identity if “I” am not recognized as such, if “I” am not watched and loved in my uniqueness. However, there is no real recognition that does not provoke gratitude in “me”, for being freely known, recognized, and watched and loved. Recognition arouses gratitude and, as men who are recognized and grateful, we are capable – in turn – of gratuity.

This is the paradoxical aspect of the phenomenology of the gift, which does not – as you might think – move from gratuity to gratitude, but from gratitude to gratuity. That means, basically, that no one is ever an absolute “first” giver, but every act of love is always a response, always a “second *first gift*”.

We might ask, then, how is it possible to create (or that it be created, originally) a gift of response, if it is true that there is no First, as the initial giver. Here, the response of the last Ricœur bifurcates in two directions. The first direction leads to what we might call the *poetics of a philosophy without an Absolute*. The second direction leads to what we might call the *poetics of a theology of the overabundance of the Absolute*. Maybe we should say: in the question of the “gift”, in some way, Ricœur crosses his two research directions: the philosophical and exegetical/theological. It is no coincidence that the end of Ricœur’s intellectual Autobiography, recalling precisely this “challenge” of meeting/convergence between a “philosophy without absolutes” and “biblical faith”, says: “Le petit livre bilingue *Liebe und Gerechtigkeit. Amour et justice* (1990) indique la direction à suivre pour relever ce défi” (Ricœur, 1995, p. 82).

This second leaves its traces in what Ricœur himself calls “exercises of biblical exegesis” or of “apprentice theologian”, where *Genesis* is reinterpreted as the original donation of existence (LaCocque & Ricœur, 1998, pp. 57-101); the commandment to love our enemies as the apex of the poetics of love, in *agape*; the law and justification as a gift of freedom and

liberation; eschatology as the possibility of awakening the unfulfilled promises of history. In this way, the God of hope and that of creation are, at the two ends of the economy of the gift, the same God (Ricœur, 1996, p. 32), but the poetry of this God is never ultimately expressible in human prose. It is barely graspable by the stutterings of exegesis and theology. Absolutely unthinkable for, and in, the fragile links of philosophical research³.

In this sense, in a manner consistent with the existential premises of his hermeneutic phenomenology, that of Ricœur is the poetry of a philosophy without an absolute. And the question about the First Giver remains unanswered, or better, with a response suspended in the *epoché*⁴.

It is necessary to feel loved, so as to feel recognized and be grateful. But this “primality” of love does not necessarily have to be linked to a transcendent origin.

That there is something else at the origin of our life is a phenomenological *datum*. That I haven't created myself is a phenomenological *datum*. That man is not a self-centered and self-based subject, but the recipient of a gift, an *inestimable object of transmission* (“inestimabile objet de la transmission”: Ricœur, 2005, p. 288) is a phenomenological *datum*. That the self is the result of an overabundant lineage of love, is the gift of the transmission of life (given by parents, indicated on the family tree, rooted in the history of our ancestors ...) is a phenomenological datum. Beyond these phenomenological data, begins the enigma of origin, which is the enigma of one's birth and life. It is the miracle of birth (H. Arendt), which in its incomprehensibility and unspeakability, makes each man “priceless”, worthy of praise: possible poetry - poetry of the possible (Vanhoozer, 1990; Treanor & Venema, 2010; Verheyden & Hettema, 2011). The miracle of gratuity that – although it can never cross the drift of history – offers in the gift the space for a “suspension”: “clearing” (Ricœur, 2005, p. 355; Lamouche, 2008, pp. 76-87) in which the “forest” of the “endless struggle for recognition” thins out and becomes a place of *reconnaissance* (Henriques, 2005, p. 250; Ricœur, 2005, p. 274). Will there ever be a poet and a poetics able to correspond to this enigma of the origins? The fragile word of the philosopher stops on this question. Which is also a threshold of *astonishment*. *Thaumazein* ... that is surprised by its own existence and its

³ It is the famous end of Paul Ricœur *Soi-même comme un autre*: “sur cette aporie de l'Autre, le discours philosophique s'arrête” (Ricœur, 1990, p. 409).

⁴ It should be noted that the Poetics of the last Ricœur are not necessarily related to the theological-transcendent dimension (as in *Philosophie de la volonté*), but it becomes more ethical-existential. For this reason, we do not totally agree with a number of scholars who, in a latent manner, risk turning the terms “poetic” and “transcendence” into synonyms (Nkeramihigo, 1984; Steven, 1991; Jervolino, 1995; Thomasset, 1996).

possibility to be, even without knowing how or why. Beyond every how or why: “without any meritoriousness: [...] only being a human being” (S. Kierkegaard; Ricœur, 2000, p. 656). The philosophy of the last Ricœur, with Kierkegaard, defiantly continues to think and to invite us to think that “it’s great to be men”. The end of *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*, links this Kierkegaardian praise of existence to the expression of the *Song of Songs*: “l’amour est aussi fort que la mort”.

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RIASSUNTO

Nelle ultime opere di Ricœur, possiamo trovare quella che lui chiama una poetica dell'amore. Scegliendo la strada "dialettica" di un confronto tra amore e giustizia, Ricœur sostiene che la giustizia risiede nella regola dell'equivalenza (dare a ciascuno il suo); il disorientamento dell'amore, invece, sospende il ritorno, l'equivalenza, lo scambio. L'amore non dice: "do ut des", ma piuttosto (se possiamo trasformare l'espressione) dice "do ut dem", offrire senza aspettarsi nulla in cambio: questo è ciò che Ricœur chiama "primo

dono". Tuttavia, si tratta di un'aspettativa sempre aperta alla possibilità di una "sorpresa": la sorpresa di un "secondo primo dono" in grado di soddisfare la gratuità dell'atto di donazione originale. Questo saggio si interroga su questa possibilità di "dono reciproco".

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