

«An omnipotent stepping back». Paul Ricoeur between narcissism, passivity and grace

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«Tout est par grâce» writes Olivier Abel in Jean Calvin: by this word – grace – we mean what Abel always calls «insouci de soi». In the *insouci*, that is, no longer asking whether or not we deserve the Word of Grace, we identify a precise ethical and theoretical position inside which we would like to reopen the question about the autonomy of the subject in Paul Ricoeur, hence on a possible rethinking of the dialectic between love and justice. What is the relationship between righteous action and the receptivity of receiving the Word of justification? We believe that the boundary – almost the Barthian death line – between the horizontality of autonomy and the Height of Grace – to already cite a term that runs through Ricoeur's latest thought – is the fruitful place to thematize Ricoeur's dual heritage in reflecting on the limit and the foundation of autonomy, namely the psychoanalytic legacy and the Protestant theological legacy. From Paul to Karl Barth via Kierkegaard and Freud. We want to investigate the very close link between grace and narcissism, thus between the gratuitousness of a heteronomous word and the claim to self-foundation, a spectrum that has always accompanied thinking of autonomy. Therefore, this talk is also meant to be an opportunity to rethink some points that have remained unsaturated in the Kierkegaardian and Barthian text in their connection with Ricoeurian itinerary: we will ask about the role of what the Danish genius calls the edifying especially in *The Acts of Love*, and the last chapters of the young Karl Barth's masterpiece, *The Epistle to the Romans*. Indeed, to place oneself on the border between the psychoanalytic, philosophical and theological – a position that in the wave of Kierkegaard Ricoeur defines as poetic – means rethinking the subject's relationship with himself and with the other by performing on himself the work of mourning. What relationship between grace and mourning? This Freudian expression recurs very often in Ricoeur's pages: we want to understand it as the consent to one's lack, to our proper *Inachevement*. To accept the unfulfilled means to renounce by laying down one's narcissistic self-interest, consenting to loss. This first movement, the Pauline and then Lutheran in spite of, is followed by a second, that of grace – the much more of the *Epistle to the Romans*: I am loved, I am forgiven, despite my deeds. „Since you have been loved, love also.“ The witness of this love is always in the order of singularity, of contingency: the space opened by the generosity of *agape* invites one to radically take responsibility for oneself, renouncing the guarantee of a meaning established once and for all and exceeding the horizontal of the norm. This step beyond the norm is authentically kenotic, in the very sense of «omnipotent stepping back», as Kierkegaard writes: it is in renunciation that the «readiness for the Essential» appears, to quote the very latest Ricoeur.

Keywords: Grace, Kenosis, Word, Absolute, Narcissism, Fragility

Everything begins with grace, because everything is grace: «as if it were the first day of the world»^[1] writes Olivier Abel in *Jean Calvin*. Grace is *interruption* and *relaunching*, the invitation to the most hazardous adventure and at the same time *respice* in the *inner monastery* of the self's depth, waiting

for the *unhoped*- for the gift of a friendship that is *monasticism*^[2]. Grace is not destiny, not the culmination of an effort or the perfect fulfilment of a task, but the interruption of a word *other*, *unanticipated*, the *invention* of a *just*, *exact* and *beautiful* gesture that touches and surprises us in our despair and exhaustion. Florensky writes again in his masterpiece: «But the essence of friendship lies precisely in the losing of one's soul for the sake of one's friend. (...) He who wishes to save his soul must lay down all of it for his friends, and his soul will not live again if it does not die. Friendship is necessary for an ascetic life, but it cannot be realized by human powers and requires assistance»^[3]. There is no ascetic life without friendship and there is no friendship without grace. God shows himself in the movement of two friends who choose and recognise each other. Thinking grace is to think facing the other and with the other, in the common absence of answers beyond the joy of becoming close and *deferring together*, letting be taught and divested by a ««fundamental which is at the same time exterior, anterior and superior»^[4], by an «Essential»^[5], as Paul Ricoeur calls it in the last fragments dedicated to the extreme learning of dying.

«Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow»^[6] we read in the Gospel of Matthew and in the latest pages of *Memory, History, Forgetting*. From the lilies we must learn how they stand in joy, how themselves are joy, in the present instant, without any mastery, deprived of all power. This is the *possible joy*, as indicated by Søren Kierkegaard in his best speech about the lily in the field and the bird in the sky. This *Essential*, to whom we leave space and who makes room for himself, arises in benevolence and unconcern, as the lily does, in the light of the divine seriousness and divine irony of Barthian grace, the same grace that we believe runs through the French philosopher's thought from end to end.

In this text, we would like to edge Ricoeur's thought, placing ourselves on its margin and internal fissure, in the conviction that fidelity to Ricoeur's teaching is the practice of opening up spaces to think and re-think ourselves. We are guided by trust in *confidence* and by the impertinent excess of the agape so that even being lost and despairing becomes *a more of life*, following in this the teaching of Eberhard Jüngel who defines the Cross as the «event of the unity of life and death for the sake of life»^[7]. Exceeding sense over non-sense, hope over planning. Cross and love are one and the same: beyond the exhaustion of all human possibilities, in the failure of a son abandoned by his father, the *impossible possibility* of a new word arises, a word that interrupts the continuum of despair. The foundation of new life is only given in failure. Thus, in *Être protestant aujourd'hui*, almost echoing Jüngel's adage, Ricoeur states strongly that «the meaning of the cross and resurrection is that the human being is *possible*, namely not impossible»^[8]. We want to insist firmly on the term *possible* because it is in this category that Ricoeur's kierkegaardian legacy is played out, thus the dimension inside which we want to philosophically rethink the unfolding of grace.

So Ricoeur in the same text:

I insist on this word 'possibility' because it has two contraries. (...) We cannot but be struck by the Spinozist emphasis of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. They are talking about understood necessity, love of destiny and the principle of necessity. Of course I admire this rise of necessity for which in many ways we can only be seduced, but there is more and there is better: the grace of imagination, the grace of the possible, the grace of dawning...It is here that I respond with the Kierkegaardian part of myself.^[9]

What does the «Kierkegaardian part of myself» mean? We believe this is the place where thought and practice become one. Already in *Practice in Christianity* Kierkegaard wrote that truth does not consist in knowing, but in being: truth creates a hole in the imaginary sense of knowledge because it is not homogeneous with it. Here, at the extreme limit of the practice of thought, the philosopher's task is to awaken possibility through a word «that gives what it says»^[10], as Ricoeur writes in *Être*

protestant aujourd'hui, thus the offer of a word not of knowing, or not just of knowing, but a word of being, a word that challenges to exist in responsibility for oneself. Here «It is as though the heavens parted, and the I chooses itself – or, more correctly, it accepts itself»^[11], writes Kierkegaard in *Either/Or*. To be capable of choosing ourselves because we have received, to be able to receive because we have chosen to be ourselves: this is the task of possibility, of Ricoeur's kierkegaardian part. We witness the *metanoia* of the idea of self, of the relationship between acting and suffering, between existing and knowing. It is not a solitary task even if loneliness is inevitable, because it is urged by same «the rise of necessity», without which the possibility of grace would not be credible. The word of grace is a word of bonding: it is the practice of friendship, the «miracle» we must thank if « the person consents to view from a certain distance, and without coming any nearer, the very being who is necessary to him as food»^[12], as Simone Weil teaches in *Waiting for God*. Ricoeur's thought is therefore a friendly, hospitable and fragile thought, a philosophy to be practised with others and for others, in balance between listening and taking the word, between choosing and receiving ourselves. In fact, Ricoeur always seeks other discourses to be close to, «we have no neighbour; I make myself someone's neighbour»^[13] we read in *Le Socius et le prochain*. And, in this practice of proximity, philosophy renews itself, discovering itself other, without losing its own way. Turning out to be others is perhaps being touched by something «very good», as good as *creation* was in the eyes of God in Genesis 1.31, and how good and beautiful, and *new*, every experience of meaning, from the most ordinary to the most abysmal, can be when they are embraced «in the most basic sense of an originary giving of existence»^[14], in the words of Ricoeur in *Love and Justice*. Because, as the philosopher writes in *God is Love*: «love is self-emptying in another that gives the initial self a dimension it would not have if it remained alone»^[15]. As we shall see in the text, the emergence of meaning goes hand in hand with the renunciation of closure, of believing to be the centre of oneself, or, as Kierkegaard writes in *The Sickness unto Death*, to the obstinate will to be nothing but oneself or the equally obstinate desire to nullify oneself. In a word: we must cross our inevitable narcissism. Hence, the position that we would like to occupy, and indeed, grace itself orders us to hold, is that of the *margin* and the *boundary*, namely, the space in which we feel constrained when self-loathing becomes unbearable and we suffocate «inwardness whose door has jammed»^[16], as Søren Kierkegaard confesses again in *The Sickness unto Death*. Or again when we reach the extreme of our forces and we experience the most extreme passivity, that of the body in agony, in order to transform the very agony into an *act of love*. The interrogation of grace only becomes possible on the *threshold of the world*, almost imitating the rising of dawn or the gentle fading of dusk, thus in the most fragile and saddest, most marginal hours, because, as Henry Maldiney writes in *Penser l'homme et la folie*, «the marginal marks the closest proximity to the very bottom of the world»^[17]. Approaching the «the marginal» means to embrace and touch the vulnerability – the infinite wound – that crosses us and opens us up to ourselves, surrendering ourselves to others. We do not pretend to alleviate the sorrow of a life that is surprised in its *contingency*, thus in its fading away, and yet we would like to read in this very passing away a trace of God's receding, thus the possibility of authentic obedience. «Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering»^[18] writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The God who saves us is the God who deserts us: God's weakness is, however, the omnipotence of his love. «Only the suffering God can help»^[19] writes Bonhoeffer to his dearest friend Eberhard Bethge. Along with Bonhoeffer, Ricoeur believes that becoming contemporaries of Christ is conceiving the Cross as the offering of an emptying God, namely the gift «of God's absolute weakness for the human being, enabling the new human being»^[20], as we read again in *Être protestant aujourd'hui*. Accepting God's weakness means bowing down before the «omnipotent stepping back» of Kierkegaard's edifying speeches, without being scandalised by the coincidence of incarnation and emptying, of futility and superabundance. Speaking of grace thus becomes a speaking secondly, a speaking *in debt*: «that is, to the bitten of the event»^[21], as Ricoeur writes recalling Pierre Thavenaz. Only divesting of its status of absolute beginning – *dépouillement* – thought can be said to be faithful to the event of the *κένωσις*. Philosophically imitating the obedience of Christ on the Cross means emptying oneself of

all foundation, before oneself and after oneself, precisely in order to regain grace's freedom from any pre-established meaning and perhaps from the very will to signify. To a *breaking* Word – the proclamation of Christ Crucified – must correspond a *broken* word that is conscious of being a human word, nothing but human, thus born of listening and obedient to listening. And paraphrasing Barth: if our hands are not empty, they can never receive what only empty hands can grasp. Not surrender, but ascesis, destitution, interruption of self at the centre of self: it is on the edge of this void and internal concavity that we experience that « the True God, Himself, removed from all concretion, is the Origin of the KRISIS of every concrete things, the Judge , the negation of this world, in which is included also the god of human logic»^[22], as Barth writes in *The Epistle to the Romans*. But what does it mean and how can the philosopher bear witness to this crisis, to this repentance that is re-thinking, to quote the great Swiss theologian again? This is also the question that Ricoeur faces with verse 16. 25 of Matthew's Gospel: «For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of Me will find it». A ricoueurian text is dedicated to this very verse. The Gospel pericope touches the heart of the Christological drama: in fact, in the three synoptic gospels the motif of losing one's life for the benefit of is placed immediately after Christ's question to Peter: «But who do you say that I am?» Losing one's life, the *dying to* of Kierkegaard's *Sickness unto Death*, goes along with the question of Christ's identity, hence the possibility of scandal. Peter is scandalised because he yearns for the glory of Christ, because he does not recognise that he must first and foremost be a Suffering Servant.

Peter is imprisoned in the nightmare of strength and power, in a word, in the great dream of *hegemony*. Ricoeur comments on the verse: «We must admit that the dream of hegemony is the secret dream of each of us, which we only lack the strength to realise»^[23]. A little later in the text the philosopher chooses an even stronger expression, a term that closely recalls the great Reformed dispute over justification: «our obstinate search for guarantee»^[24].

Thus Ricoeur:

To gain the world, I said, for the learned person is to seek absolute *mastery* by means of knowledge and scholarly techniques. It is also, I added, for the theologian in the believer, to expect God to be the supreme guarantee for the security of our knowledge.^[25]

Knowledge is thus inhabited by the phantasm of guarantee and assurance. The philosopher responds to the anxiety that moves through him with the mastery of thought, in the illusion of a crystal-clear sense, free of impurities and shadows. «We need to empty ourselves»^[26], invites us, again, Olivier Abel. We must be emptied to realise that *incompleteness* – the *non-all* of the Lacanian feminine – is superior to the imaginary completeness of knowledge: grace is not the exception to the All of knowledge but precisely that *nothingness* that *decompletes* it.

We believe this may be the teaching of the Hymn to Love in 1 Corinthians 13: «If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing»^[27]. We follow here a suggestion by Slavoj Žižek in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*: love is no guarantee of being something, it is not merely that with love I would be something, even in love I am and remain nothing «but, as it were, a Nothing humbly aware of itself, a Nothing paradoxically made rich through the very awareness of its lack. Only a lacking, vulnerable being is capable of love»^[28]. Without vulnerability, immensity does not emerge.

As we said, grace is neither an addition nor the reward of effort, but the demanding and responsible invitation, before any active responsibility, to lay down the ego and to undertake what Eberand Jüngel calls «letting go of self»^[29], that is, to accept the risk of a life under the sign of suffering and the absence of guarantee. This is the only way to experience the new. Laying down the self and accepting the cross are one and the same: only in this way can we be loved and helped «by the

weakness of this love»^[30], as Ricoeur writes.

We fully embrace the Ricoeurian lesson contained in *Naming God*: the referent of the term God is the index of the mutual belonging of any discourse on meaning, and, above all, the ultimate index of their *incompleteness*. The not-all of knowledge, or Lacan's not-all truth, does not lead to an intimist retreat or escape into form, is not an abdication of the quest for meaning, but becomes an encouragement to take even more seriously a philosophy that wants to be hermeneutic and indeed hermeneutic of witness. It is on this edge that philosophy approaches the religious to receive the gift that the religious offers it, the *testimony*. Only through testimony philosophy can hope to have something to say about contingency, touching somewhat on the order of existence without renouncing the universality of the concept. Again, standing on the edge of knowledge means to listen to another word, anterior, superior and exterior, a word that precedes because it was spoken before us and can only be received. «Dessaisement»^[31], dispossession, writes Ricoeur again in *Naming God*. «Listening excludes founding oneself»^[32], states Ricoeur. Listening to the semantic impertinence of the poetic and sapiential word contradicts the usual criteria of giving truth. That is the «revelatory function of poetic discourse»^[33], as Ricoeur writes in *Herméneutique de l'idée de Révélation*: poetry holds a *tensional truth* that each time reopens an apparently closed discourse, a desperate discourse because full of *ego*. In *imagining otherwise* and in obeying a grace that is donated in imagination before knowledge, we exercise the Kierkegaardian *passion for the possible*, that is, we reopen a gateway to hope beyond despair.

Maldiney writes: «the melancholic lacks possibility because he lacks openness»^[34]. We could say in reverse that the desperate lacks openness because it lacks possibility, following Kierkegaard's lesson. Again led by the Danish philosopher, we dare say that breathing in the possible means to be taught and dispossessed by the extravagance and oddity of the evangelical discourse. The *agape* speaks, entering the order of language, distorting it and then re-orienting it. Hyperbole suspends philosophical prose, turns it into hymn and celebration, disorients it and brings it, once again, to the threshold of poetry. The poem of praise interrupts the horizontal language of meaning and justice and proclaims, «It is a silent voice but not a mute one»^[35] – so Ricoeur in *Memory, History, Forgetting* – the *excess* and *exception* of *agape*, the «much more» of Romans 5. . «Forgiveness is possible», proclaims the voice, the same small and gentle voice of 1 Kings 19:12^[36]; «life is stronger than death», «sense exceeds non-sense», foolish and meaningless affirmations just as divinely folly and insignificant is the idiot goodness of Prince Myshkin. Thus Ricoeur in *Memory, History, Forgetting*: «There is forgiveness as there is joy, as there is wisdom, extravagance, love. Love, precisely. Forgiveness belongs to the same family»^[37]. That *there is* of forgiveness is without why, as the rose of Angelus Silesius or the «Nothing-, the No-One's-Rose» invoked by Paul Celan in his *Psalm*. «In thy sight would we bloom, In thy spite»^[38] says the poet again: this prayer asks for nothing, neither works nor asceticism – and yet orders with the punctual force of the commandment «You, Love me!»^[39]. «A Nothing we were, are now, and ever» and yet called to correspond this *poetic* commandment, an order that precedes and exceeds the norm, as Ricoeur writes in *Love and Justice*, recalling his beloved Franz Rosenzweig.

The «You, Love me!» of founding passivity is in fact combined with «active assumption of responsibility»^[40], as we read in *Une obéissance aimante*. Love contains within itself the conditions of its obedience, it gives what it commands, as Augustine would say in the *Confessions*. Yet it is this precedence of the gift that allows the impossible and the hyperbolic to be demanded: the unconcern for self or carelessness about the self, as Abel writes. And maybe, the love of enemies. Though, *unconcern* must be accompanied by the gaiety about which Ricoeur writes very close to death, a gaiety daughter of the Franciscan divine joy and the Russian oddity of fools in Christ. «The grace is the carelessness of knowing if one has the grace»^[41] states again Abel. However, we must not understand the surrender to God and the confidence in grace as a quietist position or as *fuga mundi*,

but as the possibility of free, autonomous and perhaps even *blessed* action.

«Love believes everything – and yet is never deceived»^[42] we read in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*. Trusting the primacy of love means laying suspicion on oneself and others to dare Prince Myshkin's foolish and childish confidence. Love is never disappointed because it is always plunged into reality, with the shy yet firm eyes that glimpse in the other a goodness and a truth that the other did not know he had. In resting in the origin – not yet and not necessarily symbolised in a personal God – we can say that we are autonomous, that is, responsible and capable of responding to the other, loving him despite his weakness and for his weakness above all. A fragile, useless work, just as fragile and useless is the absolute in its resplendence in some shattering but also very vulnerable moments: the hearing a good word, the embrace of a loved one, the revelation of friendship. No «Great Other» and no Universal Law justifies the space in which the new happens, nothing guarantees remaining in love except love itself, no completeness, no perfection. Žižek writes in *The Fragile Absolute*: «Perhaps the true achievement of Christianity is to elevate a loving (imperfect) Being to the place of God – that is, of ultimate perfection»^[43] and to perfect autonomy, we would add. Love is indeed the true *new action* because it is without justification: it is the action that contains the «the meaning and the fulfillment of all 'not-doing'». Love is the breath we breathe, when in the real of evil, we have no breath left»^[44], as Barth writes. In the «not-doing» of mercy – the veritable «new doing», Barth therefore sees the saint's unconcern, so his joy.

Ricoeur hoped to die this way, faithful to life but totally detached from himself and his small ego, hence from the will to survive. Thus Ricoeur: «Let God, at my death, do with me as he wills. I demand nothing, I demand no'after.'»^[45] I offer to others my desire to exist, so that others may sustain it after me, interweaving my story with theirs, so that it may not be dispersed. Grace is forgetting oneself, but the grace of graces is «to love oneself humbly, in the same way as any other suffering member of Jesus Christ»^[46]: this is the conclusion of *Diary of a Country Priest*, the words of which hold Ricoeur almost under a spell, so much so that the philosopher reads there the title of his most famous work, *Oneself as Another*. This faith of being handed over to the hands of others, part of the suffering and imperfect hands of Christ, is enough to lay down the burden of one's own existence and claim nothing but the desire to be remembered – even by us, perhaps – for its gaiety without reason, stronger than death and guilt.

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Notes

- [1] ABEL O.: *Jean Calvin*. Paris: Pigmalion 2009; p. 293, translated by the author.
[2] FLORENSKY P.: *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters* (p.318). Princeton: Princeton University Press.1997, tr. eng. JAKIM B., p. 318 . «And every friendship, like Christian life in general, is in this sense monasticism».
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[6] Matthew 6:28, King James Version
[7] JÜNGEL E.: *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute Between Theism and Atheism*, London, New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark 2014, tr. engl. GUDER D.L., p. 339, «It is this as the unity of life and death for the sake of life which the loving ones can never exhaust, a unity which God revealed in his identification with the Crucified One. This surrender is the precise opposite of that self-realisation which exhausts all the possibilities worthy of striving after. It opens up constantly new, inexhaustible possibilities. This love, which does not exclude but integrates eros, does not exhaust itself».
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- [24] *ibidem*, p. 4166.
- [25] *ibidem*, p. 4190.
- [26] ABEL O.; *ivi*.
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- [32] *ivi*.
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- [36] 1 Kings 19:12, King James Version, «And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice».
- [37] *ibidem*, p. 6946.
- [38] CELAN P.; *Psalm*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57173/psalm-56d23a67be159>.
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