

Paul Ricœur and the Poetics of the Gift

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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*.¹ 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 other, more appropriate, terms 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?"² 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".³ Of this dialectic⁴ we only want to consider the crux: what does it mean to say that *love is poetry*?⁵

¹ See in particular Paul Ricœur, *Liebe und Gerechtigkeit. Amour et justice* (Tübingen: J.B.C. Mohr & P. Siebeck, 1990). In this paper, I refer to the English translation by D. Pellauer: "Love and Justice", 23-40 in *Hermeneutic of Action* (ed. R. Kearney; London, Sage, 1996).

² Ricœur, "Love and Justice", 23.

³ Ricœur, "Love and Justice", 23.

⁴ On the particular Ricœurian "dialectic", I take the liberty of referring to my book *Io e tu. Una dialettica fragile e spezzata: percorsi con Paul Ricœur* (Bari: Stilo, 2008).

⁵ A first and more extensive version of this theme is in Annalisa Caputo, "A Second Copernican Revolution. Phenomenology of the Mutuality and Poetics of the Gift in the last Ricœur", 231-256 in *On the Proper Use of Phenomenology – Paul Ricœur Centenary* (ed. O. Abel and P. Marinescu). *Studia Phaenomenologica*, 13, 2013.

1. 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".⁶ 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 his 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,⁷ 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".⁸

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

⁶ 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.

⁷ On this subject see David W. Hall, *Paul Ricœur and the Poetic Imperative. The Creative Tension between Love and Justice* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), in particular chapter 6.

⁸ Ricœur, "Love and Justice", 27.

person. Praise attracts praise. Poetry attracts poetry. The offering of oneself, the gift attracts the gift.⁹

Then, where is the difference between the lover and the “merchant” (this is the word used by Ricœur)?¹⁰ 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”¹¹ 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 normality, to return it to its original momentum. In this sense, love is always il-logical. 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*.¹²

In relation to this “logic of superabundance”, even more radically, in *Le parcours de la reconnaissance (The Course of Recognition)*¹³ 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 hyperethical. 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 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.¹⁴ 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, as hyperethical, is a way of suspending the ethical (...).”¹⁵

⁹ On this subject, see John Wall, *Moral Creativity: Paul Ricœur and the Poetics of Possibility* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), in particular pp. 130-136.

¹⁰ See in particular Paul Ricœur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance. Trois études*, Paris: Stock, 2004. English translation by D. Pellauer, *The Course of Recognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005).

¹¹ Ricœur, “Love and Justice”, 33.

¹² “Love and Justice”, 33-34. For Ricœur, the “crazy” apex of this love is to love our enemies, as is proposed in the evangelical *agape*.

¹³ I believe it is possible to consider *Parcours* as a last phase of Ricœur’s thinking, beyond those usually proposed by scholars: see for example Jean Greisch, *Paul Ricœur: l’itinérance du sens* (Grenoble: Millon, 2001); Marcellino Agis Villaverde, “Paul Ricœur en perspective: evolución y etapas de su pensamiento”, in *ÁGORA – Papeles de Filosofía (Paul Ricœur)* 25/2 (2006).

¹⁴ On love and justice, see in particular Antoine Garapon, “Justice et reconnaissance”, 231-248 in *Esprit*, March-April (2006); Paula Ponce de Leão, “De l’universel au concret. Justice et éthique dans l’œuvre de Paul Ricœur”, 85-98 in *Répliquer au mal: Symbole et justice dans l’œuvre de Paul Ricœur*, (eds J. Porée & G. Vincent; Rennes: PU Rennes, 2006); Christoph Theobald, *La règle d’or chez Paul Ricœur. Une interrogation théologique*, 139-158 in *Paul Ricœur. L’herméneutique à l’école de la phénoménologie* (ed. J. Greisch; Paris: Beauchesne, 1995).

¹⁵ Ricœur, “Love and Justice”, 37 (italics mine).

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.¹⁶

The gap, the jump is from the logic of the market (including the fairest market) to the *sans prix*,¹⁷ that is the “without-price” of poetry: in-utility, anti-market. Here Ricœur, inevitably – as a philosopher – cannot but remember the *pricelessness* of philosophy, much akin in its in-utility to the anti-market of poetry.¹⁸ 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”.¹⁹ 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 dignity²⁰), the poet responds with the fragility of his desire, a desire that Ricœur, in a strong and original manner, called “*optative*”.

2. The Optative of Mutuality

The poet is a man of the optative, that is to say a mode that is neither descriptive nor normative (“ce mode qui n’est ni descriptif ni normatif”),²¹ 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”.²² 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

¹⁶ Ricœur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, 337.

¹⁷ See Marcel Henaff, *Le prix de la vérité. Le don, l’argent, la philosophie* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2002), quoted by Ricœur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, 339-343.

¹⁸ Ricœur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, 339-341.

¹⁹ Ricœur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, 343-44.

²⁰ See Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 621-625; Ricœur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, 327-337. On this subject, see Alison Scott-Bauman, *Ricœur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion*, 59-77. (London/New York: Continuum, 2009). She distinguishes two phrases in Ricœur’s writings from the 1960s: ‘masters of suspicion’ and ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’.

²¹ Ricœur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, 354.

²² Ricœur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, 335.

for you. In this sense, the possible reciprocity, is not, would not be exchange, but mutual recognition, mutuality (*mutualité*). Reciprocity, Ricœur points out, is something above us (“tourne au-dessus de nos têtes”) while mutuality is between us (“circule entre nous”).²³ 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.²⁴ In Ricœur’s own words:

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.²⁵

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 of something perhaps not fulfilled: “attente, qui peut être indéfiniment 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.²⁶ For this reason, every authentic gift is a place of hope, “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”: it 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”²⁷: it is the poetry of the optative: gratuity that evokes gratitude and gratitude that evokes new gratuity. It is *reconnaissance!*²⁸ 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

²³ Ricœur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, 335.

²⁴ Ricœur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, 336: “l’accent tombe sur la générosité du premier donateur; plutôt que sur l’exigence du retour du don”. See Marcel Henaff, “Remarques sur la règle d’or. Ricœur et la question de la réciprocité”, 326-337 in *Paul Ricœur* (ed. M. Revaut d’Allonnes & F. Azouvi; Paris: L’Herne, 2004). He defines “reciprocity” as the way in which Ricœur breaks the Cartesian circle of egology.

²⁵ Ricœur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, 350.

²⁶ Ricœur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, 351-355. The surprise of this giving of oneself freely enters “dans la même catégorie affective que le premier”.

²⁷ Ricœur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, 354. See Olivier Abel, “Fragilité de l’approbation”, 45-57 in *Foi et vie: Ricœur ou le pari de l’universel*, 5/103 (Dec. 2004); he speaks of a “reconnaissance inquiète” (p. 54).

²⁸ On this subject, see in particular Peter Kemp, “Reconnaissance à Ricœur - Ricœur et la reconnaissance”, 63-74 in *Hommage à Paul Ricœur* (eds O. Abel and J. A. Barash; Paris: Unesco, 2006); Maria Villela-Petit, “Três estudos de Paul Ricœur como etapas de uma filosofia do reconhecimento”, 47-59 in *Multitextos (CTCH): Uma aproximação a Paul Ricœur*, 5/1 (2007).

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*.²⁹

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;³⁰ 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,³¹ 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 research.³²

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*.³³

²⁹ 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”: Paul Ricœur, *Réflexion faite* (Paris: Esprit, 1995), 82.

³⁰ See, in particular, André LaCocque and Paul Ricœur, *Penser la Bible* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), 57-101.

³¹ See Ricœur, “Love and Justice”, 32.

³² It is the famous end of Paul Ricœur *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 409: “sur cette aporie de l’Autre, le discours philosophique s’arrête”.

³³ 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,

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”³⁴)* 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 (in Hannah Arendt’s terminology), which in its incomprehensibility and unspeakability, makes each man “priceless”, worthy of praise: possible poetry - poetry of the possible.³⁵ The miracle of gratuity that – although it can never cross the drift of history – offers in the gift the space for a “suspension”: “clearing”³⁶ in which the “forest” of

see for example Théoneste Nkeramihigo, *L’homme et la transcendance selon Paul Ricœur. Essai de poétique dans la philosophie de Paul Ricœur* (Paris Namur: Culture et vérité, 1984); Bernard Steven, *L’apprentissage des signes. Lecture de Ricœur* (Dodrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer, 1991); Alain Thomasset, *Paul Ricœur: une poétique de la morale* (Peeters: Leuven University Press, 1996); Domenico Jervolino, *Ricœur. L’amore difficile*, (Roma: Studium, 1995).

³⁴ Ricœur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, 281-286.

³⁵ On the “passion for the possible”, see in particular Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricœur. A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990); Brian Treanor and Henry I. Venema eds, *A Passion for the Possible. Thinking with Paul Ricœur* (Fordham: Fordham UP, 2010); Jozef Verheyden and Theo L. Hette-ma eds., *Paul Ricœur: Poetics and Religion* (Leuven: Peeters, 2011).

³⁶ See Ricœur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, 355: “une ‘clairière’, dans la forêt de perplexités”. On this issue, see Fabien Lamouche, “Paul Ricœur et les clairières de la reconnaissance”, 76-87 in *Esprit*, 7 (2008).

the “endless struggle for recognition” thins out and becomes a place of *reconnaissance*.³⁷

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 possibility to be, even without knowing how or why. Beyond every how or why: “without any meritoriousness: [...] only being a human being” (S. Kierkegaard).³⁸

³⁷ Ricœur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, 274. On the theme of ‘struggle’, see Fernanda Henriques, “A alteridade e o trágico na filosofia de Paul Ricœur”, 243-274 in *Herméutica y responsabilidad. Homenaje a Paul Ricœur* (eds M. Agís Villaverde *et al.*; Santiago de Compostela: Santiago de Compostela UP, 2005).

³⁸ Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli* (Ricœur 2000: 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”.