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The Original Injury or the Trauma of Love

Izvorna ranjenost in travma ljubezni

Abstract: The »trauma of love« is often thought of as a lack, a privation, or as a weakness. This consideration leads to a kind of irenicism where life is considered without wounds and love is thought of as merely being a fusion, or an integrity lacking any exemplar. And sometimes in accepting the harsh reality within the act of love we can give it so much meaning that its impossibility fails to hurt us or even shock us. Everything happens as if in phenomenology, of course, but so also in hermeneutics, and even in psychoanalysis everything must be »signified« so that nothing remains outside of the meaning that we've attributed to it. Not converting too quickly the »trauma of love« into the »love of trauma« amounts to accepting there to be an original injury that makes no sense, so then allowing for love to return and remain in a new way.

Key words: trauma, love, phenomenology, hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, sin, injury.

Povzetek: Pri »travmi ljubezni« pogosto pomislimo na neko umanjkanje ali na šibkost. Takšen pogled vodi v irenizem, ki življenje vidi brez bolečin in ljubezen enači z zlitjem ali s celostjo, ne da bi bil takšen vzor kadarkoli dosežen. In če kdaj sprejmemo trdo resničnost dejanja ljubezni, temu pripisujemo tako velik pomen in smisel, da nas njegova nezmožnost ne more več raniti ali šokirati. Zdi se, da mora tako v fenomenologiji kot v hermenevtiki in tudi v psihoanalizi vse »pomeniti« do te mere, da nič ne ostane zunaj pomena in smisla, ki ga želimo pripisati. Ne da bi prehitro obrnili »travmo ljubezni« v »ljubezen do travme« tu zagovarjamo sprejetje izvorne ranjenosti, ki nima pomena in smisla, toda v katero se ljubezen naseli in v njej biva na drugačen način.

Ključne besede: travma, ljubezen, fenomenologija, hermenevtika, psihoanaliza, greh, rana.

1. Love's irenicism

We believe that it is easy to love, yet difficult to be loveable. We indeed think first about loving than about being loved since that at least depends on us. Admittedly,

we could repeat endlessly that we need to be loved and that this is the condition being ourselves able to love. And therefore we believe that love precedes us and that in reality we never »make« love but rather that we are »made« by it. And this irenicism is sometimes such that if we do not love, or if we love badly, we ascribe it to our »love deficits«, believing thus that the »trauma of the act of loving« is but the neglect of what we should have obtained or the deprivation of what we should have been given. In this way we go back to our past as if to heal from it or at least to recognize that such a gulf was opened inside us and that, if we cannot get through it, we should at least not flee it.

The fact remains that the simplicity of such an understanding of the »trauma« that is the act of loving cannot divert us of its harsh and necessary reality at this point. Because, by criticizing it as a deficiency or a weakness, we fail to see why or how it should still constitute us, unless we establish it as rooted in our infantile life as if to justify it. In other words, if the »trauma of love« is only the accidental injury of childhood, we cannot be sure, on the one hand, that it is sufficient to look at it in order to get past it and, on the other hand, that conjuring it up does not presuppose a golden age that could have made it not exist. That the »trauma of love« *not be* or that it be *able not to be*, such is the irenic understanding of love of which we should definitively rid ourselves. Because we would probably »sink very low« by wanting to »rise too high«.

Thus, *originally*, there is no life without »trauma« – in the etymological sense of »injury« or »wound« (*trauma*) inflicted on the body by an exterior act: cut, burn, fracture etc. We could certainly believe, and even dream, of a life made of integrity in which the body never was or never had to be injured. But besides illness, against which one cannot always defend oneself, at least insofar it also represents a law pertaining to the degeneration of the living, the mere fact of exteriority prevents one from avoiding being injured, or at least hurt, by what in this context we have to call »figures of alterity«: accidents and illnesses of course, but also the death of a friend, or simply the ageing process of a life coming to its end. So-called »natural« death, as the law of the living, always remains »violent« for those who experience or approach it.

The ideal of a life »without shock« or the angelic aspiration to health without »injury« is thus not really of this world. By falsely giving the illusion that it would be better if it were different this ideal negates the presence of the other in me and makes me believe in a perfection to which I am not entitled. Man is perfectible but not perfect. *Becoming better* is better for him than being the best. The reality of sin is not that of a »decline« from an idyllic state from which man has fallen. Adam and Eve were »expelled« from paradise rather than that they fell from it – because there is neither top nor bottom in the Adamic world (Gn 3:23). Man, who can become better, can also become worse. And in this lies our greatest freedom.

Should we then give up and simply miss those past days where this might have been different (infantile or heavenly life), or even hope for future days when – as

we sometimes believe – things will no longer be this way (total recovery or the ideal of a subsequent life)? In other words, how can we stop accusing the injury of constituting us and stop rejecting the trauma like a flaw that had to be overcome at all costs? If always and forever we are »traumatic beings«, should we regret this or necessarily want to dispense with it? Would accusing our being injured in the name of some past integrity not be taking the easy way out? And, conversely and maybe even more so, are we not sometimes tempted to too easily welcome or falsely desire the injury, as if living it were to convert it in a form of vulnerability that should be sought imperatively? Do we not often see injuries being »spiritualized« to the point that any scarring would become the lucky stigma of a supposedly improved life? In short, whether one rejects or claims it, is the »trauma« of love not deduced from a nature that we are no longer (integrity) or pulled toward a form that we are not yet (vulnerability) to the point that we do not see, or do not wish to see, that it directly constitutes us and makes up the brunt of our existing?

2. The dangers of the signified

Let there be no mistake about it: Invoking the »injury« or even »fragility« or »vulnerability« time and time again today frequently serves as a defence, or a leitmotif, for the body or the psyche at which one does no longer dare to look. There is quite simply a danger in wanting too quickly to *interpret* everything or in demanding too much of the act of *signifying*. By overusing hermeneutics (the art of interpreting through textuality), phenomenology (the way of signifying through intentionality) or even psychoanalysis (the hypertrophy of the signifier up to the Freudian slip), one omits the »thickness« of the body as well as the »impenetrability« of thought. From an emaciated being to an open wound, from neurosis to psychosis, trauma becomes »traumatism« not only in the way it is felt but also in the horror of that objectivity of the injured body and soul. That one still have eyes to see or ears to hear and not only interpretative patterns or meanings allowing one to make sense of things, that is the challenge at stake here regarding trauma – simultaneously through its hyper-presence and sometimes also through its function as a deterrent. »Traumatic existence« is a mode of being not to be deplored or envied, nor even to be overcome or healed, because the »there« of its being simply cannot fail to constitute me.

We should thus not transform the »trauma of love« into the »love of trauma« too quickly. Because one does not seek the injury, one lives it, simply because it is there and always remains present – and one would be lying to oneself if one believed it to be absent, be it just for one moment. The fact remains that, by imagining that it better disappear or not be there, one no longer sees how much it constitutes us, even if we live it differently or transform it. One does not heal from the injury, at most one closes it or tries to make sense of it. But the *fact that it is* always resists and can never be forgotten. Be it the memory of the body or the spirit, by way of a precipice the gulf remains forever open, ready to emerge or

reemerge. One event (illness, accident, the death of a loved one) can suffice to make us sense it again and then the worries of the past as well as the anxieties regarding the future do not stop haunting us. *Dasein* alone, or »being-there«, always subsists but this time not as an opening to the world giving it meaning (Heidegger) but as the mere fact of its »being faced with«, which is all the more insupportable in that the sole idea of carrying its burden becomes in itself unbearable. The actual trauma is not only the fact of something »hurting«, as if it were sufficient to localize the injury. The »trauma« becomes »traumatization« when it invades the entire being and thus transforms man himself into a giant wound which he will never be able to heal.

3. The original trauma

Hence *from the beginning*, and including in the Hebrew tradition, trauma or injury has been constitutive of creation: »And the LORD took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof« in order to transform it into Eve, his wife (2:22). Thus is it not that *at the beginning (en archê)* the trauma is there in the difference between man and woman? In reality, does Adam's »missing rib« not always remain *symbolically there* so that the wound of the torn torso will never be able to fully close? The same is at stake in the act of creating (in theology) as in that of being born (in psychoanalysis). If we stop believing wrongfully that on the day of our birth we came to the world *peacefully*, we will conversely realize and admit that any form of procreation demands an act of separation and thus the *traumatism* of lost unity, which really has no other objective than to let another or something other exist. If »giving birth« is usually a testimony to the act of loving, it will nevertheless remain burdened by a flaw or an initial injury which is not to be repaired or overcome but rather to be inhabited differently. The »gulf« or »mouth of shade« (»bouche d'ombre«, cf. Victor Hugo) through which we also have been begotten, or created, always remains, and it is by denying it that we live in the illusion of a love whose essence does not also consist in accepting to live as admittedly joint but never eradicated »solitudes«.

4. Who wants most wants least

So we are often wrong – as has already been said but should be insisted upon – by believing that we need to be loved before we can love ourselves. But maybe we fool ourselves by believing that we love or are capable of loving. Because love is neither solely received nor solely given according to a tune nonetheless constantly repeated. One can certainly open up in order to welcome it or make an effort to dispense it but neither its force nor its virtue will ever be satisfied with the exchange of »me« for »you«. Nor could love entirely abstract from this exchange, as if it were enough to engage in it in order to spread and propagate it to all

those willing (or not) to be loved. Staying within the terms of reciprocity or, conversely, calling upon the ideal of pure gratuitousness does not say anything or enough of what the act of loving is. Or rather forgetting the »trauma« or the »initial wound« is then such that the double ideal of either »giving back« or »not giving back« wrongfully remains at the horizon of what loving should mean. Far from the utopias of love we will thus stick to the *limit* of what we are, not beings made of integrity but also people constitutively »traumatized« or »wounded«, at least in the sense of the fracture of the other through whom we are engendered. One often wants the most but it is appropriate to sometimes be content with less. Surprisingly, minimalism in matters of love has a maximal effect – or better, it is by not doing too much that one does the most and even the best.

Of course, it is no way a matter of renouncing that »more« nor of showing a whiff of pessimism which would make us believe that »loving and being loved« is not worth the effort of sharing one's life. But man and woman or, in other words, the couple is first constructed on that flaw into which it descends rather than elevating itself to the top. Trying to go up (climbing) is totally justified. But one should not forget to go down (speleology) since water sources always fall towards the bottom and it is »down below« or »at the bottom« that we find the greatest waters. Following the river thus sometimes means accepting to dive into the sea and to join the »abysses« where »groundlessness« (*abussos*) can be, if not explored, at least recognized as being there, always present and resisting, in spite of our futile attempts to forget or eliminate it. In love, just as in speleology or scuba diving, cavity expresses fullness and contains the greatest riches for those who know how to find them or at least suspect their existence. The »trauma« or wound hence becomes – and that *from the very beginning* – constitutive of love in that alone that this false ideal of integrity, which should originally have innervated our past life, will have been renounced for the time being.

5. The act of self-differentiation

Being, as we said, neither mere vulnerability nor pure fragility, the act of loving is thus a »flaw« rather than an »opening«, a trauma (an injury as well as a wound) rather than the revelation of our own being-there (injury as gift). Sometimes in love our naïve optimism is such that we still wish to transform weakness into strength or fragility into an offering. But the experience resists such an alchemy or, at least, one does not transform asthenia into joy or powerlessness into merit that easily. There is certainly and first of all a »paralogism of force« (Nietzsche), which means that we often take as a virtue what is really only impotence or incapacity in us. By claiming weakness or praising passivity, we could be led to forget that what is at stake here is force and the necessity to fight. But conversely we would not pursue just any ideal of »great health« (again Nietzsche) either. Because, if love is not first, or at least not exclusively, vulnerability, it is not an act of »distancing oneself« and of claiming the act of existing »as such« either.

Then we could certainly also want to look for the »in-between« to satisfy us. Is the »trauma of love« not ultimately the happy medium between the claim of the powerlessness of the act of loving on the one hand (vulnerability) and the ideal of its exemption from the other (generosity)? But, as we said, by considering love as a whole one forgets and always subtracts its inner defect without every letting the latter exist »as such«. Fusion is what hides the fission inside us, whilst the dream of unity hides the urgency of difference. One does not like the other in that he is supposed to represent »my other half«, as depicted in Aristophanes' false conception in the *Symposium* (Platon), but rather in that together we are »acts of differentiating ourselves« (Hegel). Wanting to constitute a unity in order to no longer differentiate oneself is not an unrealizable dream but rather an unthinkable one. Forming »one flesh« (2:24) does not prevent us from being »two bodies«, quite the contrary.

6. The amorous struggle

In love we will thus always be »two« and never form »one«, if in this context we understand unity as the act of merging and not that of »resisting« insofar as »being against«, or rather »being all against«, is precisely what makes one exist. The same applies to man and woman as to the struggle of Jacob with the angel: »I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.« (32:26) Pressed on the other, the sciatic nerve dismissed »at the socket of the hip«, Jacob has no other choice than to brace himself on the other. Buttress or counterforce, the other in love allows me to not fall on myself (due to lack of resistance) and prohibits me from crushing him (due to an excess of power). Not falling by remaining pressed on him and not destroying him because I do not seek to annihilate him, that is the truth of *injured life* in the traumatic sense of rupture – in this context the sciatic nerve – through which I exist only by leaning on the other according to a resistance which allows me, if not to exist, then at least to get back up thanks to him. We are never two differentiated being made to encounter one another, on the contrary, it is by meeting that we differentiate. Alterity arises neither from a separated unity nor from poles that remained alien to each other. It comes from the »struggle« or the »battle«, in the positive sense of the term, through which the trial will make both of us win.

One indeed and most often forgets the constitutive value of the »trauma of love« either because we associate the act of loving to an ideal of unity, as was already said, or because we aim for a false state of peace without seeing that »struggle« (*agon*) and not »war« (*polemos*) is that from which we are made and which makes us progress. The same that holds true for lovers also applies to sportpeople or wrestlers: They test themselves and lean on each other in order to underline their difference or to thus discover what their own existence is about. So no concurrence between the masculine and the feminine but rather the intimate conviction that one will never reach the other in the way he experiences the

world, not because of the defect that this lost unity supposedly is but in virtue of this »initial injury« or »trauma« which comes to positively constitute us. At the beginning, Eve is taken from Adam's rib (original differentiation), and at the beginning Jacob is fighting with the angel (original struggle).

7. Going through the flaw

There is, or there is thus supposed to be, a »blissful failure« of love. Not that we should praise the »misfires« or not despair of the reversal of love into hate as it often occurs when lovers separate, but the »flaw« reveals the breach through which we are to move forward. *I love you because you differ from me. Or better, loving is the act of differing.* In this »faith« – not solely in the love of difference but more precisely in the act of differentiating oneself by loving – there is the constitutive value of the »trauma«. Bodies never unite without injury because they will never make up a total unity which would imply the risk of no longer differentiating themselves. And they will never actually stop their struggle either, be it in order not to believe in an unduly pacified and too easily obtained togetherness.

One would have to never have experienced eros in order to believe that the union of the flesh is simply the act of »penetrating« and not that of »resisting«. The »resistance of the flesh« of the other is what causes pleasure, which situates it far from the ideal of some form of fusion which would falsely justify it. There is indeed *tenderness* and it seeks to fully encounter the other while knowing that it will never totally succeed at it. Emmanuel Lévinas teaches us that the caress »does not know what it is looking for«, and losing oneself in this unknown is before all giving up on controlling everything. But there is also the *eros* through which bodies go »into battle«, not exclusively to unite but also to measure, or even try themselves. The *difference* that makes the »I« never a »you« – the act of differing and thus also of battling – does not equal fighting in the sense of crushing the other but of recognizing that through the other and the injury he produces in me I get to exist.

The »blissful failure« of love (the impossibility of encountering the other there and where he experiences himself) is coupled with »blissful obscurity« (the renunciation of wanting to attain the other fully in what he is, because in his difference he takes me back to what I am). The thickness of the bodies concurs with the impenetrability of the psyche. We will not experience the other in his own body any more than we will penetrate entirely the depths of his thoughts. One and the other – body and spirit – live and suffer from the very same inaccessibility, and it is by recognizing this that the trauma will cease to belong to the order of the accidental and transform into a veritable factor of our common identity. The same is at stake as with the »flaw« – for the mountaineer, of course. The cavity of the rock expresses the entire wall and that through which paradoxically it is still possible to have a grip and to go on up. The smooth spots do not allow for

a roped party and only the »rugged« makes the act of climbing still possible. The shield of habit (Péguy) or the illusion of a flawless love is the biggest danger in the act of loving. We can only climb where there are asperities and it is by recognizing them that together it is possible to rise. The »injury« in this sense is not desirable but still to be recognized as being constitutive of the act of loving. At this price, and at this price only, we might not only praise vulnerability but above all consecrate the »body-to-body« (*corps-à-corps*) and the »heart-to-heart« as the ideal places where the gulf still leaves us »gaping« insofar as it opens us to an alterity which indeed comes to »injure« us.

Translated by Natalie Eder