

RESURRECTING THE WORD. THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE GIFT IN NORMAN MAILER'S THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE SON AND IN COLM TOIBIN'S THE TESTAMENT OF MARY / FAIRE REVIVRE LA PAROLE. LA PHÉNOMÉNOLOGIE DU DON DANS LES SCRIPTURES SELON LE FILS DE NORMAN MAILER ET LE TESTAMENT DE MARIE DE COLM TOIBIN / ÎNVIEREA CUVÂNTULUI. FENOMENOLOGIA DARULUI ÎN EVANGHELIA DUPĂ FIUL DE NORMAN MAILER ȘI TESTAMENTUL MARIEI DE COLM TOIBIN¹

Abstract: This paper investigates the phenomenology of the gift in Norman Mailer's *The Gospel According to the Son* and in Colm Toibin's *The Testament of Mary*. Both texts are contemporary reinterpretations of the Gospels and they are resurrecting the Word through the process of defamiliarization. In Mailer's text this takes the shape of a full-fledged narrative of the Gospels in which we are very sparingly given the author's insight on the events. In Toibin's novel we are assisting at a first-person narrative of Mary, the mother of Christ, who is telling her version of the events around Christ's death. Both texts present themselves as a necessary correction to the mistakes made by the apostles in writing the Gospels.

These novels will be interpreted through the lens of Jacques Derrida's and Jean-Luc Marion's theories on the gift. In *The Gift of Death* Derrida viewed God's gift to the world through the sacrifice of Christ as fraught with shortcomings. Norman Mailer's novel rediscusses some of these limitations and puts into a new light Christ's relationship with the Father. In his own analysis of the phenomenology of the gift, Jean-Luc Marion put forward the notion of "saturated reader" which entails the reader (understood in the large sense of the word) faced with the exceeding revelation of God. Colm Toibin's *The Testament of Mary* constructs such a reader and foregrounds in an original way the phenomenology of the gift.

Key words: resurrection, saturation, gift, reader, phenomenology

This paper discusses the phenomenology of gift in Norman Mailer's *The Gospel according to the Son* and in Colm Toibin's *The Testament of Mary*. I have chosen these two texts because they both rediscuss/rewrite the Gospels from original points of view. Mailer's novel, although it does not depart greatly from the Gospels, puts everything from the perspective of Jesus Christ and Toibin's book offers the point of view of Mary. What interests me in these texts is the phenomenology of revelation and the kinds of readers it creates. This will be discussed in terms of the gift of infinite love which appears in several stances in Mailer's text and of the constituted witness in Toibin's novel.

Derrida talked about the phenomenology of gift in his book *The Gift of Death* (*Donner la mort*). In it he proposes the idea that God's gift of death upon Jesus Christ is a gift of infinite love which could have been accomplished only in death which is the only one capable of overcoming the economy of gift:

"On the basis of the Gospel of Matthew we can ask "to give back" or "to pay back" means (thy Father which sees in secret shall reward thee). God decides *to give back*, to give back life, to give back the beloved son, once he is assured that a gift outside of any economy, the gift of death – and of the death of that which is priceless – has been accomplished without any hope of exchange, reward, circulation, or communication" (Derrida, 1995: 96)

Derrida constructs his arguments around Jan Patocka's writings.

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Jan Patocka relates the sacred to responsibility – he underlines the fact they are incongruous. To him, the loss of consciousness experienced in the sacred amounts to a loss of responsibility and is more akin to demonic rupture. (Derrida, 1995:1) Another intention of Patocka's text is, recounts Derrida, the attempt to distinguish religion from a "demonic form of sacralization" (Derrida, *op.cit.*: 2). In Patocka's view, religion is that which has surpassed the demonic and the orgiastic. Responsibility comes into play in the religious context to delimitate between the responsible (Christian) character and the unconscious for instance *nympholeptos* particular to the pre-Christian polytheism. This in turn amounts to acknowledging the *ethical* dimension of the religious man (Derrida, *op. cit.*: 3). In Patocka's view, the religious man is defined as responsible or ethical because initially the demonic was equated with irresponsibility (possibly the fallen angels' failure to observe God's words). Patocka's inquiry has larger implications such as the fact that Europe's ignorance of its origins and of the responsible character of its religion leads to the presence of historicity which is inherently forgetful of its religious sphere. The way Derrida sees it, responsibility has to remain external. On the other hand, Patocka states that historicity must remain problematic. This is what Derrida has to say about it: "History can be neither a decidable object nor a totality capable of being mastered precisely because it is tied to *responsibility*, to *faith*, and to the gift" (Derrida, *op. cit.*: 5). According to Patocka, the kernel of understanding consists in conjoining paradoxically faith and responsibility. The problem here is that this conjunction unites two heterogeneous lines of interpretation: one that identifies the religious character as inherently responsible and the other which defines the secret of pre-Christian orgiastic mystery that the responsible character has to disrupt. The passage from Platonism to Christianity implies the mutation from the perception of the self through the self to the perception of the self through the eyes of God via the *mysterium tremendum*. Derrida insists on the importance of the notion of *conversion* in Patocka's work. This process goes hand in hand with a process of repression: Christian mystery is that which will repress the orgiastic mystery (Derrida, *op. cit.*: 9). We should add to that the process of incorporation which Derrida defines in the following terms:

"This subordination therefore takes the form of an 'incorporation' whether that be understood in its psychoanalytic sense or in the wider sense of an integration that assimilates or retains within itself that which it exceeds, surpasses or supersedes [releve]. The incorporation of one mystery by the other also amounts to the incorporation of one immortality within another. This enveloping of immortality also corresponds to a transaction between two negations or two disavowals of death. And in what amounts to a significant trait in the genealogy of responsibility, it will be marked by an internalization, by an individualization or subjectification, the soul's relation to itself as it falls back on itself in the very movement of incorporation" (Derrida *op. cit.*: 11).

Derrida points out the similarities between Patocka and Heidegger. The notable difference, however, consists in the fact that Patocka takes into account an incorporation of an earlier mystery into the religious content. This signifies that the demonic does not go away, it is rather repressed and resurfaces at different times. This incorporation or concealing takes the shape of a *secret*, a secrecy which one becomes aware of in the moment of conversion. Thus, as Derrida says, the (orgiastic) mystery is never destroyed (Derrida, *op. cit.*: 21). Politically, it occurs for instance in the moments of revolutionary fervor. There are several stages of absolution: the first involves the redemption from orgiastic/demonic fever through Platonism; the second one implies the Christian conversion or reversal by escaping from Platonism (Derrida, *op. cit.*: 22).

The second attribute of Patocka's writing is, Derrida notes, that the fact that he reattributes to revelation the ontological content Heidegger had taken away from it. Thirdly, Patocka deplors the resilience of Platonism in the heart of Christianity.

In the second chapter entitled "Beyond. Giving for the Taking. Teaching and Learning to Give. Death", Derrida discusses other concepts encountered in Patocka's work. For instance the inauthenticity of the technological society indicates a relapse into the demonic and the orgiastic. There are affinities between boredom and the demonic, Derrida states. Patocka's considerations on modern technology and boredom can be related to what he calls a "metaphysics of force" (Derrida, *op. cit.*: 17), according to each modern man has become a sort of field for the deployment of force.

Furthermore, Derrida discusses the moments of conversion in relation to the idea of "gift of death":

"The first awakening to responsibility, in its Platonic form, corresponds, for Patocka, to a conversion with respect to the experience of death. Philosophy is born out of this form of responsibility, and in the same movement philosophy is born to its own responsibility. It comes into being *as such* at the moment when the soul is not only gathering itself in the preparation for death but when it is ready to receive death, giving it to itself even, in an acceptance which delivers it from the body, and at the same time delivers it from the demonic and the orgiastic. By means of the passage to death the soul attains its own freedom" (Derrida, *op. cit.*: 40).

Moreover, the entrance into the Christian paradigm involves the presence of the notion of *gift*, the introduction of the transcendent Other Who sees me but Whom I do not see and which has entered relation with me through the gift of infinite death enacted in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

This implies the gift of a goodness unaware of itself, a goodness that is given in secret, that bestows upon me all the benefits of this giving.

Norman Mailer's text is a novel written in the first person narrative by a character who identifies himself as Jesus Christ. In this we can see Norman Mailer's intentionality of writing a more authentic gospel, one that sets right the mistakes made by the apostles. This idea is stated in the beginning of the book when the narrator undermines the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John by stating that they exaggerate in important respects. However, the novel does not depart greatly from the four gospels in the narration of events. For instance, the narrator acknowledges the influence of the gospel of Matthew in the narration of the three magi episode.

The book reiterates the miracles surrounding Jesus' birth and childhood. There are angelic presences accompanying these events which attest to the divine origin of Christ. Besides these disparate episodes, the narrator insists on the lay character of his early life, on his experience as a carpenter.

The first encounter with God is when Jesus goes to John to be baptized in the waters of Jordan. There, God speaks to him and bestows His gifts upon him: "And I felt as though His finger blessed my mouth the moment when the dove's beak touched my lips. His word descended in me as the burning fire in my bones when I was twelve and had suffered from fever" (Mailer, 2006: 41).

The epiphany occurs suddenly and it takes the form of a gift of the blessed word. It is resented by the receiver as an illness as something that burns him inside out. The encounter with God leaves the receiver in a somewhat passive stance, he simply receives the gift, without having the time or the possibility to deny or to accept it. It is resented as a tremendous, overwhelming presence which leaves no doubt on the origin of the gift. It is a descending movement which is epitomized by the dove's descent onto Christ. This gift has the power of conversion, it transforms the receiver into a new, better man: "Now I knew the

other man who had lived in the shell of my being and that man was better than me. I had become that man” (Mailer, *op. cit.*: 43).

Through the divine intervention, Christ has access to His higher self which will slowly replace His lay persona, the carpenter who had grown in His father’s shed. Significantly, the conversion takes place only when Joseph dies. It is at that time that Joseph great secret, the one concerning Christ’s birth, becomes relevant again and Christ is thus reminded of His divine origin and of His true Father: “Then His voice whispered in my ear: ‘These were my words to Ezekiel. But to you I say: You are My Son, thus you will be stronger than a prophet. Even stronger than prophet Ezechiel” (Mailer, *op. cit.*: 60).

Thus, God’s first gift to Christ is the gift of prophecy, the transmission of His Word to the children of Israel. This involves a displacement of the self, letting go of one’s words for the benefit of God’s words. Christ reemerges from the waters of Jordan as the son of God as well as His messenger. He is anointed as the one John had prophesized about, the Messiah. This implies giving up His earthly vocation and embracing the destiny God had in store for him. The gift of infinite love involves an act of co-participation in the apophatic letting go of the self and the emergence of the self as a servant of God. Mailer surprises very well these events in the life of Christ and, as compared to the Gospels, makes God more present for Christ, he creates the epiphany in that key moment in Christ’s life. Christ’s reaction to the epiphany is of fear mixed with uncertainty, He does not understand why God had chosen Him to transmit His word. To this God responds with another command: “Because you are still not strong, don’t go back home. Better go and climb the mountain in front of you. Go now. In that desert, fast among the cliffs. Drink water from underneath the cliffs. But do not eat anything. Before the sun sets at the end of the last day of fasting, you will know why I have chosen you” (Mailer, *op. cit.*: 45).

God speaks to Christ and shows Him the path to follow. Moreover, He shows Himself to Christ the moment of the baptism thus acknowledging the divine origin of Christ who is the only one able to see the face of God without dying. While in the desert, Christ hears again the words of God and has a dream which tells him how many days he has to fast and why he has to give his destiny for the salvation of the children of Israel. It is because they bowed to Baal that the children of Israel risk perdition. This motivation, together with that of the salvation of Jerusalem will help Christ reject Satan as he appears to Him on the fortieth day of fasting. As such Christ accepts His status as the intermediary of a gift from God to the people of Israel: “Thus I began to believe in my Father. I will work for Him. It won’t be long until he comes to rescue Jerusalem. He was the God of the Universe. I will work gladly. Through Him will descend the succor for those who are suffering, and the hungry will no longer starve and the lawless ones will be forgiven. (Mailer, *op. cit.*: 65).

Christ responds to the gift of God by offering his own life to the service of God and of the children of Israel. The motif of work, which also appears in the four Gospels, is reiterated in Mailer’s novel as the sign of a life in the service of God. Christ as a working man has been less emphasized in the literatures on this subject but Mailer stresses this function and uses it as a sign for Christ’s own gift to the Father. This gift creates a responsible character as Christ is gradually transformed by God’s grace. This gift of responsibility was also noted by Derrida: “The gift of death that puts me in relation to the transcendence of the other, with God as selfless goodness, and that gives me what it gives me through a new experience of death ... [...] the gift of death would be this marriage between responsibility and faith” (Derrida, *op. cit.*: 6).

But God’s is an ambivalent gift. The grace bestowed on Christ allows Him to perform tremendous miracles but it will endanger Him in the eyes of the enemies of God. The many miracles that Christ performs are ways of imparting God’s gift to the rest of the world, means by which Christ creates a connection between the people and God. It is in this context that we should understand the fact that Christ chooses to heal on a Sabbath day, despite the overt criticism of the Pharisees. As Derrida explains, responding to God’s gift

means sacrificing ethics: "As soon as I enter a relation with the other, with the gaze, look, request, love, command or call of the other, I know I can respond only by sacrificing ethics that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, the same instant, to all the others." (Derrida, *op. cit.*: 68).

God's gift is limitless and it exceeds the human law; not only does it exceed it but renders it irrelevant. It is through the excess of the limitless gift of love that Christ works and His deeds are a testament to this gift. The human law, as Paul explained, is under the sign of a curse and it concerns sin; Christ's existence is the abolition of the curse as well as of sin. This is why Christ's works have very little to do with the religious law and enter conflict with it because the law was the result of anger and reason whereas Christ's works and existence are the result of love. But the Christ of Mailer is a fearful Christ who shows His frailty in key moments such as the one of the encounter with Satan. Nevertheless, the gift of God entails the abandonment of all fears and of all human contingency. It is a gift demanding an exceeding self-annulment: the abandonment of the loved ones, of home and work. Mailer's Gospel echoes closely the words of the Bible: "He who loves his father and mother more than he loves me is not worthy of me, just like the one who finds his soul has to lose it first. But he who shall lose his soul for me, he will find it" (Mailer, *op. cit.*: 118). This is a reminder that Christ's own gift to humanity involves something that exceeds contingent existence and that contingency is an impediment in the way of salvation.

Mailer quotes from John to express the meaning of love and gift in his novel: "So much did God love the world, that He gave His One-born Son so that whoever believes in Him should not die, but have eternal life" (Mailer, *op. cit.*: 262). This gift had to take the form of self-sacrifice in order to express God's infinite mercy towards the sins of mankind. As far as the relationship between Christ and God is concerned, Mailer concludes that God was not God with capital letter but one of the many gods and that Christ's death shows His limitations. In the novel, Mailer focuses on the battle between God and Satan as epitomized in the battle for Christ's soul. This becomes climactic in Christ's last moments on the cross when He hears the words of both. When He asks "God, Why Hath Thou forsaken me?", He gets no answer but He has the vision of Adam and Eve committing the originary sin. It is thus implied that this is the sin for which Christ has to give His life. This gift is an exacting one but it is the only one which can adequately respond to God's gift of infinite love.

This phenomenology of the gift appears in Colm Toibin's *The Testament of Mary*. In this text the focus is on the receiver rather than the giver. The narrator, Mary mother of Christ, retells her experience from the life and death of Christ and her ways of coping with the overwhelming events surrounding the presence of Christ in her life. She emerges, to use Jean-Luc Marion's terminology, as a constituted witness, completely shaped by the revelations which are bestowed upon her. First, let us look at what Marion understands by constituted witness:

"Far from being able to constitute this phenomenon, the *I* experiences itself as constituted by it. Constituted and no longer constituting, because it no longer disposes of any viewpoint that would dominate the intuition that submerges it. [...] Thus, the phenomenon is no longer reduced to the *I* that would be regarding it. Irregardable, it proves itself irreducible. [...] The pure event that occurs does not allow itself to be constituted in an object and leaves the lasting trace of its birth only in the *I/me* which finds itself, almost against itself, constituted by what it receives. The constituted witness follows the constituting subject. Constituted witness, the subject remains the worker of truth, but no longer its producer" (Marion, 2001: 44).

The constituted witness is the result of the phenomena of revelation or what Jean-Luc Marion called saturated phenomena. In this process or, rather, event, the reader or interpreter is no longer in control, the ego is annulled and the *I* becomes the scripture of history. The *I* will let itself be constituted and changed by the saturated phenomenon. Its

response is not a direct answer other than the one implied in the “Here I am” answer but the action that comes in the aftermath of the revelation. It is also a phenomenon of givenness and should be regarded as the same gift which was received by Mailer’s Christ. Only in Toibin’s novel the I is also the (helpless) spectator of the intercourse between God and Christ.

Toibin’s book is old Mary’s monologue on her current state and her memories. She has little to say about the key events in Christ’s life and the events that have concerned her also but she recalls her reactions to these events, the unspeakable suffering which she had gone through: “There was a time when I believed that I no longer had tears, that I had shed all of them. [...] I should feel relieved that I no longer need tears, but I am not seeking relief but only solitude and the bitter contentment that comes from the certainty that I shall never speak a lie” (Toibin, 2014: 9). Like Mailer’s narrator, Toibin’s Mary’s aim is to restore the truth and dissipate the falsity that has accompanied the accounts of Christ’s life. In her old age, Mary is constrained by her two protectors (both of whom are writing Gospels) to retell what had happened in the day of Christ’s crucifixion. But the only ways in which she can relate to the event is by calling it “what was happening on the hill”, “the horror” (Toibin, *op. cit.*: 13). The traumatizing event of the crucifixion is impossible to put into words; instead, Mary focuses attention on other events which, no matter how horrifying, are still easier to retell than the crucifixion of Christ. One such event is her being followed by a cruel man who was in charge of capturing Christ’s apostles and followers; another is the quite graphic image of the bird being fed rabbits. This last episode represents *en abyme*, the utmost cruelty and evil of Christ’s crucifixion. Mary avoids speaking about that event proper, although she is pressed to do so. But she cannot pronounce the name of Christ: “I cannot say his name, it won’t come to my lips, if I utter it my heart will break. So we call him “he”, “my son”, “our son”, “the one who was here”, “your friend”, “the one you care about”. Maybe before I die, I will say it or I will be able to whisper it one night, but I doubt it” (Toibin, *op. cit.*: 14). This unnamability of Christ corresponds to God’s own unnamability. The events of death and resurrection have relegated him to the sphere of the divine which is characterized by the inexpressible. This corresponds to Jean-Luc Marion’s definition of saturated given phenomena: Christ’s death is “incapable to look at according to modality” (Mation, *op. cit.*: 34).

Toibin’s Mary is not transfigured by Christ’s sacrifice; she is forever impressed by the traumatic event of his death. She lives her life in the realm of shadows and her memories always take her back to the moments when she saw her son tied to the cross and full of blood. There is no relief for her save perhaps the temporary succor she receives from the figure of the goddess Artemis. She is able however to relate some of Christ’s miracles such as the one on the resurrection of Lazarus. She relates this event in a matter-of-fact way, with distance not including any personal statements on this event. What she retains from this episode is the danger in which her son places himself due to the many miracles he is making. However, from these miracles and especially from people’s reaction to them Mary understands that she cannot convince her son to come back home with her to safety. Going to the marriage of Canaan, she meets a Christ who is adamant on continuing the path he has taken and refusing the safety proposed by his mother. Mary is completely helpless and deprived of agency in these instances, she cannot avoid being a mere witness and not a real influence in the life of Christ: “it was frightening to read in their eyes fear mixed with respect, so I looked down to the ground” (Toibin, *op. cit.*: 53). As she leaves Canaan to go back home, she expresses her desire to at least be close to Christ: “Maybe to be there to see what the others were seeing. Maybe to be around if they permitted me to be around. Not to ask any questions. To be witness. To know. There were things I couldn’t put into words” (TOIBIN, *op. cit.*: 64). Her elliptical speech shows her limitations in receiving the given divine events. She is incapable of putting into words the completeness of the experience

and she is also incapable of helping her son in any way. To conclude, gift appears in both Mailer's and Toibin's novel as the epiphany of the divine love.

Both characters are constituted by the gift of God's love and their lives become transformed in accordance with the specificity of the gift.

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