

About Vengeance

Prologue to "Free Interpretation Redux", Godi Gutierrez

I met with Godi in Caucaia Park, Sao Paulo in September 2008. I hadn't seen him for a few years, from when we had gotten together with several friends to ask ourselves how one goes about integrating the death of someone we love. It had been an unforgettable gathering, in which something transcendent lightly touched us, reconciled us and launched us toward the future, in search of true meaning. Godi was now studying the theme of vengeance, and invited me to reflect together with him once again.

Both of us were very moved by Silo's talk in Rome, when he was asked about social reconciliation. What could the peoples do who have suffered wars and exterminations in order to reconcile themselves, or what can we ourselves do when we've been damaged by violence in our personal and familial life. Silo said on that occasion that if we want to truly enter into this theme, then let us meditate on Vengeance; he then added that we will be unable to answer the question on social reconciliation if we do not understand how deeply rooted the structure of vengeance is in Western culture. "That profound belief that one can resolve something by making the other person suffer the same thing that they made me, or others suffer."

Godi in his book investigates the function fulfilled in the psychism by revenge and slowly reveals it to us as a mode of reestablishing an equilibrium, of compensating a core of conflict in which vengeance is an instinctive reaction, in order to reestablish psychic equilibrium. He delves into our roots, enters into the psychology of Paleolithic man, attempts to show the usefulness of that mechanism when the human being struggled to overmaster nature, and how that same mechanism, transferred into historical epochs, is leading us to self-destruction. He carries out an inquiry, comparing cultures, and discovers how, in Eastern cultures, great men arose who were capable of leaping over their violence and proposing non-violence.

Vengeance (or revenge) consists of doing harm to another who has harmed me. It is about a punishment that I inflict on another because of the evil they have caused me. Punishment and vengeance are existentially synonyms. Revenge is executed by applying a punishment. It may be that we don't consider ourselves as vengeful, but it is very probable that we apply punishments to our children, friends, subordinates, etc. When Justice is the one that applies the punishment, we don't call it Revenge. Punishment is not decided by my enraged impulses, but by the codes of a social contract, that has been previously conceived, and supposedly with a certain rationality. However, in the background of these judicial codes, discipline and punishment prevail, and the sentiment of revenge that we have dragged along as a burden since the times of our hominid ancestors.

"I don't want vengeance; I want justice," we say. I don't want to apply the punishment by my own hand; I want society to be the one to restore my dignity, by judging the one who has done me harm and punishing them. I want it to be put on the public record that that action deserves condemnation and is a bad example for all. In other words, I not only want

punishment for the guilty -- I want my own vindication, my own affirmation through the punishment of the other. The harm caused me, besides the injury in and of itself, took away my dignity, stripped me of humanity. And that dignity, that humanity that was taken away is what I want to recover through the other's punishment.

Thus, vengeance does not just seek to harm the other because of the harm they did to me; it also seeks -- and this is what is important -- to recover the humanity and dignity stripped from me by the guilty person, and I do so by stripping them of their dignity and their humanity.

"When will the day come when the tables are turned, when the poor will eat bread and the rich, shit?" These are the lyrics of a song from last century. Why didn't people sing: "When will the day come when all of us will eat bread?" Because poverty isn't just poverty -- it is human dignity robbed, in this case, by the rich. I don't just want to eat bread; I want my humanity, my place in society, my human dignity.

Thus vengeance appears before us as a psychological mechanism for recovering the humanity that I believe I have been stripped of.

The object of my revenge, whom I consider is guilty, will experience the same thing and we will continue with the circle of violence until each faction destroys the other; in other words, until humanity's self-destruction -- or at least, until the self-destruction of that culture based on revenge.

We need to consider in this reflection that the human being is not his past; he is essentially his future, he is projected toward the future. Therefore revenge is not just about something that happened to me -- it is projected to the future by the harm that the other will cause me, by the humanity that I will be stripped of by the other, if they should ever reach that possibility. Then it will be necessary to overmaster them, to subjugate, exploit them, impede them by any and all means from having any possibility of harming me in future. It is vengeance for the future, or for my fear of the future.

Let's move on. We are placing emphasis on the idea that revenge, though carried out by causing harm to the other that is similar to the harm they caused me, is really seeking to recover the humanity that was taken away. But what is this so highly-valued thing we call 'humanity', and that was taken away from me, and what is it that I recovered in effect, when I consummated my revenge? It is about something important that constitutes my life's essence. With the harm that was done to me, something essential was taken away from me, something of the essence of my life. That thing that was taken from me makes my life lose its reason for being, its meaning. Therefore, with the Revenge I seek to recover the essence, and the meaning.

The engine of my revenge is not simply about harming the other, it is about extracting from the other a vital essence that I lost when they caused me harm. The 'eye for an eye'

doesn't seek the other's eye; it seeks to extract from the other, that essence of my humanity that I lost, when I lost my eye.

We will not define that essence...but it is what makes me human, what gives me meaning.

Why is it that I experience the harm caused me as a loss of meaning?

We are now at the heart of the issue. Could it be that at the moment preceding the harm, I was in the presence of that essence, of that meaning? Was I then actually experiencing in me, "humanity," "human dignity"? Well no – meaninglessness is what precedes and succeeds the act of revenge. It is from meaninglessness that revenge is possible. It is from the illusory state of the consciousness that believes it has meaning, that it is possible to believe that revenge will enable it to recover meaning.

Our reflection on Revenge led us to ask about the Meaning of existence.

In that chat of Silo's that I mentioned in the beginning, in Rome at Attigliano Park, he reminded us of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, saying: "Let us save man from revenge! Zarathustra comes down the mountains to visit humanity, and the first thing that attracts his attention is that they don't know that God is dead. God's death makes Nietzsche presume the possibility of a new human being, and this is the gift that he brings them, from the high mountains. Man is something that must be surpassed, he tells them -- I bring you the super-man. From this perspective, from the look we are employing, God's death is the meaninglessness; not to see it, is the illusion of the consciousness, believing it has a meaning it no longer has: God has died. Nobody listens to Zarathustra and everyone prefers the last man. "Convert us into the last man!" they yell at him, "and keep your super-man." The last man -- the one who invents happiness because he doesn't have the experience of happiness. The one who takes drugs and escapes in order to forget God's death and his own death.

Towards the end of the 1800s, the last man had not yet arrived. But today he is among us. It is no longer possible to await him. He is already here. And in the echo of the high mountains, in the murmur of the rivers, the phrase is heard: "Man is something that must be surpassed."

Dario Ergas
Santiago, Summer of 2009

(Traducción Liz Medina)