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Tradition and Identity – the Prodigal Son and His Brother

Abstract: “Saint John was a very good shepherd for his Lord. One day, a lamb was lost. He got back and, while looking for it, he ran across waters and fields [...] for three days and three nights. When he got it, he kissed the lamb’s feet: – *Poor lamb, said John, you must have hurt your legs so bad when you ran away.* If it were another man, he would have sacrificed the lamb immediately. Then God made him a saint”. This is, according to Noica, the Romanian version of the prodigal son. Where do we start from? Where we arrive through all this with the help of Noica, this is what I am trying to answer, shortly, through this text.

Keywords: parable, the brother of the prodigal son, sons’ father, redemption, freedom, tradition, identity.

About the parable of the prodigal son (*Luke* 15, 11-32) it is said that it is enough for our redemption if all the scripture were lost. It has, in itself, a dance between tradition (often broken) and identity (often not assumed). Here we are:

11. A certain man had two sons: 12. And the younger of them said to *his* father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth *to me*. And he divided unto them *his* living¹. 13. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living². 14. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. 15. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. 17. And when he came to himself³, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! 18. I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, *Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee*, 19. And am no worthier to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. 20. And he arose and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran⁴, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. 21. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no worthier to be called thy son. 22. But the father said to his

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servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put *it* on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on *his* feet: 23. And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill *it*; and let us eat, and be merry: 24. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry. 25. Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing. 26. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 27. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. 28. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore, came his father out, and intreated him. 29. And he answering said to *his* father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment⁵: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: 30. But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. 31. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. 32. It was meet that we should make merry and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.

Some specifications are needed to better understand the text and its context. There is no bigger shame for a Jew than to be a pig farmer. For instance, in Egypt, where people worshipped animals, only the pig farmers were not allowed to enter the temple. A Jewish saying specifies: “cursed be he who raises pigs”.

Then “the best robe” (“Bring forth the best robe and put it on him” / *Cito proferte stolam primam et induite illum*) was a sign of honor and distinction. The “ring” (“and put a ring on his hand”/ *et date annulum in manum ejus*) was a sign of authority (the eldest son received the ring when father died – “And Pharaoh took off his ring from his hand, and put it upon Joseph's hand, and arrayed him in vestures of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck” – *Genesis* 41, 42 – *Tulitque annulum de manu sua, et dedit eum in manu ejus: vestivitque eum stola byssina, et collo torquem auream circumposuit*. Concerned “shoes” (“and shoes on his feet”/ *et calceamenta in pedes ejus*) the meaning is: I receive you back, says the father, but not as a servant but as a son. Shoes are sign of freedom. In the East, shoes used to be a luxury; only servants walked in bare feet. The “fatted calf” not “the fat calf” (*vitulum saginatum*) was kept aside for holidays.

The question at hand is “the ethical landmark in Noica’s thinking” (Vieru 2002, 12-13; Vieru 2009, 463-468). Noica did not write a treaty of ethics as he wrote one of ontology. In Noica, the systemic spirit prevails over the systematic one. Therefore, even in “The Parable of the Prodigal Son and of This Son’s Brother, in the interpretation that Noica makes, speaks about two moral behaviors and, as such, about two ethics. Between these two ethics, the contradiction is, indeed, unilateral” (Vieru 2009, 466). In this case, Noica can certainly be a moralist but in no way an ethicist.

Both sons (because they are both sons rather than brothers) are wrong. They never wrong, however, in the same manner, even if they wrong in the same time. One's mistake is to ignore and to ignore himself if he doesn't know God. This matter gives him the motivation and puts forth the stake. He looks for his identity by paying the price of sacrificing the tradition. He leaves in the world to look for God. Therefore, he tried not to ignore himself but instead to look for himself. And, the very ignorance that condemns him and throws him in sin is the same that saves him, because his ignorance is one of blamelessness. It is not a sin to be ignorant, as Greeks state. Pride is the problem, and the prodigal son is not a proud one. Unknowing and blameless, the prodigal son is forgiven. Noica ask himself: "God might save him, who knows?" (Noica 1992, 2).

As I said, the other one is in the wrong too, but not because he does not know but because he does, and he remembers. The prodigal son's brother knows God and, therefore, he knows himself. But not completely! For him to respect tradition, he has to be satisfied with an identity cut in half.

Father loves the same the prodigal one and the wasted one: "He loved them both, the eldest and the cadet; maybe less the cadet than the eldest, but the difference was so small he didn't even realize it himself" (Papini 1922, 191). Father's love is understood differently by the two brothers. The more the father loves his prodigal son, the more the wasted son hates his brother. The Father's son has different effects over the two sons. For the prodigal son, it is a heavenly love, for the wasted son it is a diabolical one. The father, like in some sort of ontological balance, is ready to be generous to both. It follows that the sons' reaction generates the father's attitude who is willing to trespass both tradition and obsession for identity. When he runs to meet his son, he breaks the tradition. When he overlooks his sons' stubbornness, he preserves their identity by breaking the tradition again.

The prodigal son's brother submits to the command and he sees the father more as a master than a father. If he is given orders a lot, he submits a lot. He knows how to submit; he is only submission. Even if he doesn't know that, he cannot convert submission into love. His incapacity is fundamental, his incapacity to love. He doesn't know how to love, and he cannot rejoice in another person's joy. In this moment, the wasted son is angry instead of being saddened, and the father saddens without being upset. Noica asks himself: "God might save him, who knows?" (Noica 1992, 26).

The prodigal son's brother is an ideal citizen, but he is always sad and sullen. He performs a bad consolation speech in which we can see "the sadness of not having sinned. Sadness which includes, from time to time, angels and almost always mediocre people. The first of these is the prodigal son's brother." (Noica 1990, 17). And then, the prodigal's son brother takes refuge in the field where he reads Cicero. Always, the wasted reads Cicero, but I don't know why. I have the feeling that his preferred reading is *De*

officiis! He might be a model citizen and an exemplary individual but not a model person. He capable of respect but is incapable of love.

The question is not: who between the two is the best. It is not who wrongs less because, in essence, none of them is right until the end. Therefore, we might say none of them is good. But the truth is that both are alive and live fully (indeed, each in his own manner). Both represent, more or less, each and every one of us. These brothers live in all of us, Christians, hidden or in plain sight. Noica comments: “The prodigal son says: *Thank you, Lord, to have given me the taste of voluptuousness, the thirst of pride, the envy, the hypocrisy and the hate. With them, no one is great. Without them no one is alive.*” (Noica 1990, 37). And the prodigal son insists: “If I succeed in my sin, it is all right: I have voluptuousness; if I don’t succeed, it is also well: I have the virtue.” (Noica 1990, 96).

Here is the way one sins from voluptuousness and the other one, the wasted, from pride. Therefore, they both sin and both are guilty of the sin of curiosity. “The prodigal son sins from the open curiosity of the adventurer and the brother of the prodigal son from the petty curiosity of the repressed.” (Noica 1990, 27)

After finishing Cicero, the prodigal son’s brother took Voltaire and said: That’s well said, but we need to work our fields/ *Cela est bien dit, mais il faut cultiver notre jardin* (Voltaire 2005, 130). “The saying became proverbial and provoked numerous contradictory discussions.” (Spânu 2009, 260). The garden does not belong only and with priority to the prodigal son’s brother. It targets the realm of possibility, and that is why it is fertile. The prodigal son feels great here too, even more than his brother.

The problem is as follows: can the two of them be ethically judged together or separately? Noica says they cannot. “None of them can be ethically judged. The good brother incorporates the ethics. But, all by himself, the prodigal son could write one, as ethics are a simple perspective over life. And the living Christianity was never covered in a unique perspective.” (Noica 1992, 28). I therefore understand why Noica could not write ethics even if he wanted to! And this is how he passed from ethics to ontology, if we are to accept the “Becoming” as the prodigal son and the “Being” as the settled son. The unilateral contradiction passes from one register to another without any kind of paradox! Anyway, “who says *becoming into being* admits more than the mere fact about the being not contradicting the becoming. He or she would have to admit that, in return, the becoming can contradict the being when the becoming is not into being, therefore, creating a unilateral contradiction” (Noica 1998, 53). This contradiction should find itself at hand for the contemporary conscience, but it isn’t! Noica himself gets trapped by it and becomes a failed theologian. He gets saved but not completely, by Rafail, Noica’s son. He gets saved even less by Alexandru, caught

in a Hegelian “dodge”. “When a winner asks you to pray for him, then he offers you his victory.” (Noica 1990a, 7)⁶.

I said that Noica was a failed theologian. I will explain myself through several Parmenidean permutations of occurrences. The being cannot contradict the becoming, but the becoming can contradict the being when the becoming is not into being; this is what Noica says. Now, let us replace, in Noica’s paradigm, “being” with “God” and “becoming” with “world”. Where does that bring us? If God cannot contradict the world (and He can’t!), the world can contradict God when the world is not into God.

The parable of the prodigal son appears only in Luke, and the Gospel of Luke does not rely on purely biographical criteria. Its purpose is to get a deepened reading of events that were accomplished in the person of Christ. With Jesus, there is a plan in history that unfolds with the very end of people’s redemption. Not randomly, Luke is considered the theologian of salvation’s history. He emphasizes the activity and the daily action of redemption, the fact that redemption involves a permanent effort and perseverance, both tradition and identity. Therefore, the idea of the prodigal son’s parable is as follows: repentance is never too late for any of us.

We can easily notice that the prodigal son’s brother, when he speaks with his father about his brother, never says *my brother* but *Your son*. Like in ontological compensation, the father never says, *my son* but he always says, *your brother*. But the prodigal son’s brother doesn’t understand that! And “when people say, *they love each other like brothers*, people say the very thing that should not be said. It is rare that brothers really love each other [...] Instead of brotherly love, let us say fatherly love: we will be less in error.” (Papini 1922, 192). In all probability, Noica’s pragmatism was far from ethics, and this is the reason he never wrote any. Plato didn’t write some *Ethics* either. But, Aristotel, “the best mind” from the disciples, compensated. Parables, epics, myths are not really far from these forms of communication. In the parable, the narration (like in the song and in the myth) replaces the argument. The epic metaphysically surpasses the logical argument, the epic “doesn’t give something to think about without giving something to live”. “The discourse is argumentative, the narration is indicative” (see Pleșu 2012, 12-13, 17-18).

Notes

¹ There are at least two problems here: sharing the fortune and disobedience. The law of inheritance tells about the sharing of fortune between the sons, the first born having a double portion of the inheritance (this means two thirds of total cf. *Deuteronomy* 21, 15-17: 15 “If a man has two wives, one beloved, and another hated, and they have born him children, *both* the beloved and the hated; and *if* the firstborn son be hers that was hated: 16

Then it shall be, when he maketh his sons to inherit *that* which he hath, *that* he may not make the son of the beloved firstborn before the son of the hated, *which is indeed* the firstborn: 17 But he shall acknowledge the son of the hated *for* the firstborn, by giving him a double portion of all that he hath: for he *is* the beginning of his strength; the right of the firstborn *is* his. Then, the prodigal son is disobedient toward the father, as well as the other son. To be fair, we are here in front of angry sons. We notice that in *Deuteronomy* 21, 18-21 it is said: “18. If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son, which will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and *that*, when they have chastened him, will not hearken unto them: 19. Then shall his father and his mother lay hold on him, and bring him out unto the elders of his city, and unto the gate of his place; 20. And they shall say unto the elders of his city, This, our son, *is* stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; *he is* a glutton and a drunkard. 21 And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, that he die: so shalt thou put evil away from among you; and all Israel shall hear and fear”. The two of them do not risk a lot; they risk it all. It is only a father’s kind of love generosity that preserves their being.

² The passage to remember is “he wasted his fortune by living in debauchery” – *kai ekei diaskoprise ten ousian autou zon asotos / dissipavit substantiam suam vivendo luxuriose*. Three words get our attention. The *fortune*, a term translated with *ousia / substantia* (fundamentally, it is about a Father’s being which is the same as a Son’s being. But the sons do not know that, one is immature, the other is stubborn. Then we have the verb *diaskorpizo* for *wasting*. The meaning is one of *ontological disease*, of spreading, of *vicious settlement*, of *life without expectation of saving*. This connects everything with the third term *asotos* (without salvation = *a- soteria*) “The adjective *sôs* derived from the noun *soteria* (“salvation”) is connected with the latin *sanus* which means that man’s salvation is a state of ontological health of the soul” (Lemeni, 2018, 1-3) They also refer to (Pleșu 2012, 262-263).

³ “And when he came to himself” – *In se autem reversus* – it means: the *a- soterical* situation passed, salvation is close, and it is in us, “Thy faith hath saved thee” – *Fides tua te salvam fecit* – *Luke* 7, 50 (the moment with the woman who sinned). The words are equal in power with those used in the moment of the woman who bled, *Matthew* 9, 22: “thy faith hath made thee whole.” – *Fides tua te salvam fecit*.

⁴ “In the Semitic culture, an honorable man never runs. The clothing of that time was such that one could not run without lifting up the lower part of his clothes. This implied the uncovering (deemed impudent) of the legs. The father accepts this gesture. Therefore, thanks to the compassion, he admits an undignified posture” (Pleșu 2012, 267). He, therefore, breaks tradition in order to acknowledge the identity of the recovered son.

⁵ We are still witnessing of a battle of adverbs: “*never*, an absolute temporal negation, a negative adverb (numquam) used twice by the prodigal son’s brother (*Luke* 15, 29 – “neither transgressed” and “never”) and *always* – *semper*, a temporal absolute affirmation, a positive adverb used only once by the father of the two angry sons (*Luke* 15, 31). Once for the father is more than twice for the eldest son. The son at home sees himself as a servant and his father as a master, but the father only sees him as a son.

⁶ We dealt with this problem in an ethical perspective in (Adămuț 2011). Now the emphasis is moved to the theological aspect, without suspending the ethical.

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