

A Note on Poetry and the Fundamentals of the Poetic Act

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*"Contemplationis desiderium procedit ex amore obiecti:
quia ubi amor, ibi oculus"* - Thomas Aquinas²

The poetry of José Gilberto Gaspar needs no introduction³: it is pure poetry, it convinces at first contact. And it speaks for itself! Or rather, it speaks in the language of things by putting us in direct contact with reality.

Curiously enough, however, it is there that a difficulty arises: Gaspar's poetry is not, after all, so readily accessible, for it is reality itself that has become a problem for us.

This problem is the result not of how the poet speaks, but of a difficulty at the opposite end, that of the listener and his lack of capacity for hearing. For the disconnected thinking of our days and the all-too-ready snatching at catchwords have turned us aside from what is essential, so that what is proffered has become hardly comprehensible: what is simple seems to have lost its force and we find it difficult to understand the most clear truths (and in turn, give facile answers to what ought be a problem, to mystery).

Every once in a while Gaspar points a warning finger at the insensitivity and the dulling of the intelligence which beset us on all sides: From "Do not step on a flower/do not trample on love" ("*Não pises a flor/não pises o amor*" - p. 5) and the little boy with his electronic playthings, "who lives today in this world so devoid of fun" ("He never had a wooden horse to play with/nor ever played on a home-made fiddle" - "*nunca teve um cavalinho de pau/e não conhece uma violinha de cabaça*"⁴), he goes on to the self-sufficiency of the artificial rose in "The Dialogue of the Roses, *Diálogo das Rosas*" (p. 67) a tract for the times on our fascination with the supposed omnipotence of technology.

In face of all this muddled thinking, this absence of a true north, this outright wrong-headedness, what is pressingly urgent is a rediscovery of what is simple and what is human - the truth of things.

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². "The desire for contemplation arises from the love for its object: for love opens the eyes of the beholder" (*In Sententiarum* III, 35, 1, 2).

³. This text is originally the "Prefácio" to J. G. Gaspar's *Nos braços do sol* (São Paulo: Edix, 1997), revisited in English translation.

⁴. "Toy Fiddle" ("*Violinha de Cabaça*", p. 65)

This is precisely what poetry is all about, and on this point - as the classical philosophers Aristotle and Aquinas affirm - the poet is akin to the philosopher "*uterque circa mirandum versatur*"⁵ both are in the thrall to *mirandum*, to that which excites a sense of wonder.

This affirmation, that wonder is the principle of the act of philosophy/poetry - *admiratio est principium philosophandi*⁶, says Aquinas⁷ is at the same time an affirmation of a commitment with the simplest everyday reality. A dulling of the spirit occurs when man is no more capable of wonder, or needs the sensational, the bizarre, to provoke in himself a substitute for true wonder, in other words, when he needs *ersatz* wonder: "To apprehend in the ordinary, the everyday, that which is uncommon and not the humdrum everyday, *mirandum*, that is the principle of philosophy [...] both the philosopher and the poet concern themselves with the marvellous"⁸. The poet, then, as Gaspar shows clearly in "I Don't Know, *Não Sei*" (p. 72), finds his material in the plainest of realities, in a drop of water, even:

I have for a long time been noticing
Observing with interest, what a beautiful thing is nature!
The night dew falls and starts forming, suddenly,
Just a tiny drop of water, and how much beauty there is
.....
Just one tiny drop of water, and suddenly there is so much poetry.

*Já há muito tempo que eu venho reparando,
Com interesse observando, como é bela a natureza !
Cai o sereno e vai formando, de repente,
Uma gotinha somente a mostrar tanta beleza.
Equilibrando-se, ela desceu pelo arame
E, na folha do inhame, foi cair com o calor.
Desceu dançando, que bonito o seu bailado
Pelo Sol iluminado, seu vestido é furta-cor.
(...)
De uma gota, de repente, vejam só quanta poesia⁹.*

The secret is that the poet looks¹⁰ while others merely see....

It is the "sublime gift"¹¹, which Gaspar describes again in "Judgement - *Parecer*" (p. 76): it is "winged" and "navigates" the seas of thought. It is a question of sensitivity: It is not that the poet inhabits a different world¹², but that he sees - with wonder in his eyes - the meaning and the beauty that exist day after day in the same reality.

⁵. In *Metaph.* I, 3, 4.

⁶. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, 41, 4 ad 5.

⁷. Both Plato (*Teeteto*, 155d) and Aristotle (*Metaph.*, A, 2, 982b) had affirmed that wonder is the *arkhé* (the principle) of philosophy.

⁸. Pieper, Josef *Was heisst Philosophieren?*, München, Kösel, 8a. ed. 1980, p. 63.

⁹. "The Tiny Drop of Water - *A Gotinha*" (p. 17).

¹⁰. "Look with attention" is what the verse in "Message, *Mensagem*" says again (p. 15).

¹¹. "The Gift, *O dom*" (p. 34).

¹². "Parecer" begins by affirming, "Sing, Poet, yours is another world. *Canta, Poeta, que teu mundo é outro*". It is - as the poem itself shows - the same world but lived in on a "larger scale, *dimensão maior*", and that is what gives the poet possession of "all that exists": he looks while everyone else merely sees.

For us, however, reality has ceased to be an object of wonder, and has become nothing but a dull and colourless thing¹³. The unpretentious simplicity of poetic values eludes contemporary man, a creature stifled by a consumer and mass mentality which has given him the illusion of self-sufficiency in a world made his creature by technology - with all its flash and "special effects" - but which has left him discontented and with a sour taste in his mouth: it is not for nothing that "sophisticated" is derived from "sophist".

Where are the roots to be found of this stifling of both genuine philosophy and the poetic act? The clue can be found in Hölderlin's¹⁴ very much to the point: "Of what use are poets in times of penury?"

Our difficulty in understanding poetry - and it is symptomatic that great poets are so scarce in present-day Brazil! - lies above all in a true appraisal of this penury: "Our times", says Heidegger, "can hardly understand the question; how are we to understand the answer given by Hölderlin?". And Hölderlin's answer coincides exactly with the essence of the great classical tradition of aesthetics: that penury is absence. The penury of our times has nothing to do with material want, but with the absence of meaning, absence of being, and the absence for us now of God, who might possibly exist, but *in altera Welt*, "in another world", not in ours.

True poetry, in the last resort, can only flourish as affirmation, as the expression of its witness to the world, and the beauty¹⁵.

"But", to return to Hölderlin's poem, "ah, my friend, we have arrived too late... yes there still are Gods, but they are above us [...] What do I mean? I don't know. Of what use are poets in times of penury?". This absence should not be regarded as a lament resulting from a facile sentimentality: it has a deep, solid content perceived intuitively by Gaspar and expressed in his poetry in a masterly fashion.

And a classic example of this is "The Dialogue of the Roses", a poem that restates the idea of creation as an intellectual blueprint conceived by God.

We must remind ourselves - following as always Aquinas's analysis - that *mirandum*, wonder over an object, arises from its exemplar formal cause, God¹⁶: "*Deus est causa formalis creaturarum*"¹⁷.

To affirm that God is the formal cause is to affirm that Creation is an intelligent act from which being receives - from the *Logos*¹⁸ - a truth, a *ratio*, an intelligibility in its being: "the truth adds to a being a relationship with the exemplar form"¹⁹, that being, so to speak, is transmitted to human intellect and ingenuity: the artificial presupposes the natural - "*Ars enim in sua operatione imitatur naturam*" (*C. Gentiles* III, 10, 10; *In Phys.* II 4,6.).

Thus in "The Dialogue of the Roses", an artificial rose argues with a natural rose and vaunts its "immortality". The natural rose, in its turn, after demonstrating that, in reality, the artificial rose never had life evokes double exemplar causality:

¹³. "Causa alicuius usus idest utilitatis...", as Aquinas says of non-poetry and non-philosophy in the quotation from *In Metaph.* I, 3, 4

¹⁴. From the poem "*Brot und Wein*".

¹⁵. Or, at least, as an absence felt as such, experienced as a form of deep longing for its created character - and to the presence of God.

¹⁶. If we were making a more thoroughgoing analysis, we would arrive at the consideration that God is also the efficient and final cause (*De veritate* I, 2, 6, 3).

¹⁷. *De veritate* I, 2, 3, 11 or I, 3, 1, 3.

¹⁸. "Verbum est forma exemplaris" *Summa Theologiae* I, 3, 8 ad 2.

¹⁹. Verum (addit ad ens) relationem ad formam exemplarem (*In Sent.* I,d.8,1,3).

You are a *copy* of me
It is because of me that you exist....

.....
So I do not envy
Your long existence
You were made by Man
And I, by the hands of God!

- *Tu és uma cópia minha*
É por mim que tu existes...
(...)
Não tenho inveja, portanto
Dos longos dias teus
Foste feita pelo Homem
E eu, pelas mãos de Deus!

The negation of God nowadays is above all the negation of creation and of exemplar causality: "There is no human nature, says Sartre, the principal spokesman of contemporary atheism, since there is no God to conceive it" ("*puisqu'il n'y a pas de Dieu pour la concevoir*")²⁰.

In Gaspar we meet the selfsame word that Sartre and Aquinas use to refer to creative formal causality: to conceive. Even the simplest of flowers²¹, recognizing that it was created (by the "miraculous" intelligence of God: its little seed "by God chosen", etc.) preens itself: "not because it is beautiful and sweet-smelling / But because it was well conceived".

Recebido para publicação em 11-09-14; aceito em 25-10-14

²⁰. The creative act of God is an intelligent act, says Aquinas, like that of the craftsman who realizes the form that his mind has conceived (*quam mente concipit* - *S. Theol.* I, 15, 1).

²¹. "The Branch and the Flower, *O ramo e a flor*" (p. 70).