

Appendix I

*For A History of Mercy*¹ by María Zambrano (1989)

Before history appeared, there was a prehistory of history: poetry. It is founded by certain poems like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, as well as other poems. They featured the oldest of all civilizations, where the first stories and visions of human events appeared. These stories are poetic; therefore religious, and eminently dramatic. In such poems, only extraordinary individuals appear, and they are agents of large feats. History is the account of great and extraordinary actions; being in history itself means to enter a certain immortality that separates the heroes from the rest of the mortals.

This heroic sense of history has endured remarkably, like all the origins. History as an account of immemorial feats still persists, especially in the *naïve* consciousness of the people. It is the memory of what is wondrous. But history has also been science, and, in this field, it went to pick up facts, mere events, that were decisive and transcendent, but that did not necessarily have to be heroic. To be transcendent means nothing but not ending in itself, that is, to trespass its own limits. Moreover, this scientific way of making history, left aside everyday life; the life that elapses without fanfare and forms the plot, the only scrim where one can draw the extraordinary action or transcendent event.

This anonymous life that did not reach the historical category has been the subject of the novel numerous times. Hence, the best history in some periods of Western culture has been the novel, the best history and the best sociology, since it corresponds to what is now known as the study of “life forms.” That is the situation now; more than extraordinary and transcendent individuals and events, it is important to capture the forms of life, the way life is modeled through economic, social, and political relations, among others. But there is something else in the novel and in poetry.

Novel and poetry have reflected better than the historical knowledge, the true life, the truth about the things that happen to people and their inner sense. In order to be complete and truly human, history will have to descend to the most

1 Morcillo et al. eds., *The Modern Spain Sourcebook*, 35-41. Translation by Asunción Gómez.

secret places of the human being, the so-called “insides.” The insides are the least visible, not only because they cannot be seen, but because they resist being seen. And the insides are the seat of emotions. But the term “feelings” is so broad that we should stop there because within its field lies mercy, the feeling we are providing a brief history of.

Is it just a feeling? Perhaps, in the realm of the mental life, there is nothing more difficult to define than feelings. When we try to understand them, we realize that they constitute the entire life of the soul, that they are the soul. What would happen to a man if the capacity to feel could be removed from him? He would even cease feeling his own self. Every single thing that can be the object of knowledge, everything that can be thought of or subjected to experience, all that can be desired, or calculated, is previously felt somehow; this applies to the being itself because if it could only be understood or perceived, it would not address its own center, the person. Making an effort to imagine this state, we see it as a kind of abstract dream, a total alienation in which even the things themselves would not be perceived due to a lack of interest, due to the absence of someone who perceives them.

More than any other psychic function, the capacity to feel creates who we are; we could say that while we possess the rest of the psychic functions, feeling is what we are. Thus, feeling has always been the supreme sign of authenticity, of thriving truth; it has been the ultimate source of legitimacy for what human beings say, do or think.

With so brief an observation, we see that if something has the right and the necessity of history is, precisely this vast world of feelings, because its history will be the most accurate history of humankind. However, the difficulty is great, according to a law that seems to preside all human affairs: the greater the need, the greater the difficulty. Feelings are abundant and elusive; since they are the liveliest thing of our lives, they are also the most intangible; the most ready to escape, leaving us with a kind of effervescent vacuum, when we try to capture them.

They are the most rebellious to be defined. That is the reason why poetry and novel have been their best channels. Because what characterizes feelings is the capacity to be expressed, not analyzed. Expression is part of the life of feelings and, when it is achieved, far from fading, they acquire an adamant kind of entity that makes them transparent and invulnerable to time. Since in our present time, a rationalist notion about the life of the soul has prevailed, knowing about feelings has been decreasing, finding shelter in the most hermetic places. One of the greatest misfortunes and hardships of our time is the inscrutability of deep life, of the true life of feelings, which went into hiding in less and less accessible places. Creating its history, albeit timidly, will be a liberating task.

But what is mercy in the immense and delicate world of feelings? It is perhaps the initial feeling, the widest and most profound; something like the homeland for the rest of the feelings. Although hesitantly expressed, this might seem a very bold

assertion, but we hope that along these brief pages, this idea will gain power in the mind of the hypothetical reader. We have to start with an attempt to “present” this feeling, since a definition is, as we have indicated, the most inadequate and clumsy way to approach mercy. But, since feelings –especially mercy– do not have an adequate definition, they must have a history. The objects that have an adequate definition, to the point of coinciding with it, are called “ideal objects”: a triangle, a character from a novel, a thousand-faced polygon, and a round square do not have a history. Instead, that which seems impossible to be captured in a definition, is expressed without losing anything in its multiple and successive manifestations; that is, it is expressed in its history.

Mercy cannot be adequately defined, because it constitutes the epitome of a specific type of feelings: the amorous and positive ones. Mercy is not love itself in any of its forms and meanings; it is not charity either, a particular form of mercy discovered by Christianity; it is not even compassion, a more generic and diffuse passion. Mercy is like the prehistory of all positive feelings. And yet, it accompanies them in their history, and mercy itself has a history. And here we have to stop to see the specific form feelings take in their historical path.

The idea we have about the historical path, like any path where time is involved, is one of destruction: “the destructive time” is the image that lingers in the consciousness of almost all human beings; hence, the history of feelings or anything of what constitutes the intimacy of the human condition has not been attempted yet. History seemed to be a sequence of things that destroy the previous ones, a sort of parade of fleeting shining instants that are replaced by other shining instants. The philosopher Bergson has provided a masterful criticism of this linear conception of the passage of time, which has been represented as a series of dots that follow one another and that they are consumed as they pass by. Time, according to Bergson, it is growth with multiple forms, in which every instant penetrates and is penetrated by other instants; instead of destroying, time creates. This fundamental thesis of contemporary metaphysics casts a bright light on our topic, since feelings, in their history, do not destroy each other. Therefore, Mercy can be the mother to all positive or amorous feelings, without being swept by them, as they come.

Moreover, it is also something that contradicts the common idea that feelings appear in history, instead of appearing all of a sudden. We still have the idea that human beings are formed once, and forever. Maybe so, but it is also true that the capacities or potencies of their being are revealed progressively, while manifesting themselves throughout History. That is why there might be, there is, a history of feelings; because humans have not shown suddenly from the outset of their appearance on Earth, all its fullness and complexity; these are revealed, unraveled. The horrors and sufferings that History is littered with, are “ultimately” justified. Through the vicissitudes of History, the human being unravels, is brought to light; that is, the human being is being born in History, instead of having been born once.

Mercy appears to us as the matrix where the life of feelings originates. Let's see why. Without trying to define it, as has already been said, we must form a certain idea of what we understand by it. To this end, we should dispose of the idea of feeling, since, as it happens with all elaborated and widely used concepts, it carries a load of misconceptions. Moreover, the very term "feeling" corresponds precisely to the stage of thought where Mercy has been more unknown. Thus, if we approach it directly, it seems to escape us. But there is a very old way to get to these entities and it is what theologians have called the negative way. An ancient Hindu mystic referred to God by saying that it is "neither this nor that." This definition has reached throughout the ages the highest theology with Plotinus and the highest mystics. The subtle things that cannot be apprehended by their presence, can be perceived through their absence, through the gap they leave. And we should not be scared by such a procedure, because we surely have experienced it in our own lives: we feel what the loved person or the friend are when we lose them, because of the irreparable void they leave us with; the same goes with homeland landscapes, with health, and with the possessions that are indescribable because of their immensity. They overflow our soul, they flood our consciousness, and they possess us. How do you define them?

To define is to see distinctly the limits of one thing, and seeing it requires to have it at a distance, to distinguish the limits of what is seen, to see it among other things in the same plane, forming a set. Large goods and evils, by contrast, possess us; we feel that they exceed our life and our consciousness. Almost always we need to lose them or to have them concealed in order to recognize them through their absence.

Thus is Mercy. Undoubtedly, it has suffered in recent times an intense eclipse which coincides with the rise of rationalism. Enthusiasm for reason and for its results, the light radiating from rational knowledge seems to have thrown its shadow over Mercy. Since this has been happening for quite some time, we can look with perspective and ask ourselves: what are we missing? That which the wonderful methods of science and technical creations could not give us. Which is our situation as human beings in the Universe? And the answer comes to our conscience immediately, as if it was there, before the question was posed: we are alone, alone as human beings and alone in front and among things: we dominate them, we handle them, but we do not communicate with them. If we were to take mercy as the act of treating people, animals and plants gently, it could seem that such communication exists. But mercy is not philanthropy, or compassion for animals and plants. It is something else: it is what allows us to communicate with them; in short, it is the diffuse and gigantic feeling that places us appropriately among all the planes of being, and among different beings. Mercy is knowing how to deal with what is different, with that which is radically other than us.

The idea that a man is, above all, conscience and reason has led us to consider that only another man can be equal to him. But the process does not stop there, because as differences exist between men and since there are races, nationalities, cultures, social classes, and economic differences, we have come to the quite apparent spectacle of current society. We only know how to deal with those which are almost a reproduction of ourselves. When the modern man looks out to the world, he is searching for a mirror that reflects his own image, and when he cannot find it, he is puzzled and often he wants to break the mirror. We have become terribly incapable to understand that there are people different from us. To fill up this void, the word “tolerance” was invented, a favorite term in the vocabulary of modern society. But “tolerance” is neither understanding nor proper treatment; it is simply, keeping distance, respectfully, with everything we do not know how to deal with.

Other periods of time show us an opposite situation, like the Middle Ages for example, when Mercy was not eclipsed. Naturally, without violence, without speeches or official organizations, medieval people knew how to deal with that which was different in a spontaneous way: in the human world it was the incurable patient, even the monstrous or the criminal. Beyond humanity, there were chimeras and ghosts, angels and Gods. God Himself was not conceived as a great consciousness, it was not reduced to humanity. Instead, the modern man has tried to reduce everything to what he can find immediately within himself; to what he believes is his essence: to conscience, to reason. Everything has been reduced to reason and conscience and that which resisted this transformation, became unknown, forgotten and, sometimes, reviled.

And that is how we ended up alone; alone and unable to deal with “the other.” But if we put together the various kinds of “otherness,” we realize that it is nothing but reality, the reality that surrounds us and where we are anchored. Thus, we perceive more clearly the vital problem which was hidden under the problem of knowledge in the last stages of Philosophy. It is known that the problem was precisely reality, the apprehension of reality. It seems that consciousness and intelligence by themselves do not provide assurance that we are in contact with reality. And science, with all its splendid results, has also failed to give humans the deep conviction that they are knowing reality, that irreplaceable communion that human beings had in more *naïve* and pious ages.

Reality, and philosophers discover this fact again, occurs somewhere previous to knowledge, to the idea. The Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset developed the concept of “vital reason” based on his discovery that the reality is prior to the idea, contrary to what Idealism formulated. And if reality is prior to the idea, it has to be given through feelings. Mercy can be understood as the feelings experienced by a subject, by someone who feels reality not in a diffuse and homogeneous way, but distinguishes instead the “species” and type of realities that somehow must be favorable to him. That is, a subject who feels reality and at the same time feels

himself heterogeneous from it. Awareness of solitude and, at the same time, consciousness of participation, sociability. The rationalist believes that reality is given through an idea or thought and that only by reducing reality to thought he can understand it. Mercy is the feeling of the heterogeneity of being, of quality of being, and therefore it is the yearning to find the ways of understanding and deal with each one of those multiple ways of reality.

This which is evident to us now by contrast, and as we stated above, by absence, was an ingenuous belief before rationalism; ingenuity and the further back in history we look, the stronger this ingenuity was, until we see it constitutes the mentality, the way of life of primitive peoples.

Does human progress inevitably condemn Mercy? Modern ethics has sought to replace it with different virtues or values, such as philanthropy, cooperation, and justice. Today everything is asked on behalf of justice and what it is given is equally awarded on its behalf. Will it be enough? Will values such as justice or cooperation be able to fill that sentimental gap left by Mercy, and feed the flame of creation? Will the heart and the entrails of humans be satisfied with nothing more but what is being granted by justice? Can the anguish that we feel today be dissipated with remedies born in the mind? Reason and justice are sisters, they walk together; one is in practice what the other is in knowledge. But their sole rule will assume that humans only need to know visible and tangible things and to feed from them. But since you do not live from bread alone, justice and reason are not enough.

Won't there be, away from distinct and clear knowledge, the necessity of other knowledge that is less distinct and clear, but equally indispensable? Are not there things and relationships so subtle, hidden and indiscernible that they can only by apprehended by feeling or intuition? Will we be able dispense with inspiration? In sum, let's say the dreaded word that we have been concealing so far. Will it not be a bedrock of mystery supporting everything that is clear and visible, everything that can be enumerated? This would be the ultimate and abysmal bottom of the inexhaustible reality that man feels in himself, filling him up in the happy moments and in suffering; joy and suffering appear endless. And in them it is when we feel that reality not only touches us, but also absorbs us, it inundates us.

Mercy is knowing how to deal with the mystery. That is why its language and its ways have repulsed the modern man who has thrown himself frantically to deal only with what is clear and distinct. Descartes assigned to ideas the qualities of "clarity" and "distinction." Nothing can be challenged but, insensibly, we have come to believe that "clarity" and "distinction" are also the notes of reality. And the truth is that only very few realities can achieve that privilege, those to which we alluded earlier, saying that they are the ones that can be defined. However, there is a vast territory that surrounds us and hugs us, that sometimes reject us, submerging us in anguish and despair, and these feelings are neither clear or distinct. And there they are; we have to deal with them every instant. It is simply our own life. Mystery

is not found outside; it is within each of us, surrounding and enfolding us. We live and we move within mystery. The guide to avoid getting lost in it resides in Mercy.

