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WHEN THE FACTS “CALL DOWN VENGEANCE”. FEELING OF REVENGE, SENSIBILITY TO INJUSTICES AND (A HINT AT) RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE IN SCHELER’S FORMALISMUS

abstract

The aim of this paper is to provide an elucidation of what, at first sight, appears as a specific and negative affective phenomenon, namely that of revenge, which although its sinister popularity risks constantly to be muddled with a simple state of excitement deprived of intentionality or with a kind of “justice without justice”. The understanding of the nature of revenge and of impulse of revenge allows to enlighten a peculiar feeling’s class, to which revenge in a certain sense belongs to, and to investigate the meaning and the sense of Scheler’s ambiguous term “Vergeltung” in order to attribute to retributive model of justice, by a comparison with revenge, its correct role and place in the world of Scheler’s. Our back-idea is the one, according to which, refining sensibility to injustices can contribute to a primary form of identity, namely that of our living body.

keywords

Revenge, emotions, retribution, sensibility to injustice, life

RIGOLETTO

(con impeto, volto al ritratto)

*Sì, vendetta, tremenda vendetta,
Di quest'anima è solo desio...
Di punirti già l'ora s'affretta,
Che fatale per te tuonerà.
Come fulmine scagliato da Dio
Te colpire il buffone saprà.*

GILDA

*O mio padre, qual gioia feroce
Balenarvi negli occhi vegg'io!
Perdonate...a noi pure una voce
Di perdono dal cielo verrà...*

(G. Verdi, *Rigoletto*)

0.
In the Sign
of Zorro: is it
Possible “to
Execute the
Revenge”?

Revenge! What is it? How do we recognize it? Are there only revenges towards the others or are there self-revenges too? Is it possible to “prevent” revenge, avoiding e.g. that a simple pulse tendency could flow into an irreparable gesture?

In the moments of grave economical and social crisis, in which the formal equality of the political, social and juridical rights risks constantly to be (and in actual fact it is) belied by real power relations, when an evident contradiction (such as this) favours, namely, and foments crawling forms of *ressentiment*¹, it is more than ever important to reflect upon this negative phenomenon that often constitutes, among other things, the starting-point of the *ressentiment*. Moving from Scheler's account of revenge and from disquieting analogy (that is not identity) of this attitude to a specific juridical model – the retributive model – I would like to provide a contribute to the studies on theories of emotions,

1 I am clearly referring to the Scheler's Theory of *Ressentiment* and to its sociological relevance. See Scheler (1972⁵ b, 37-38). The short inquiry about the revenge, that I want here to make, constitutes a part of a more vast work dedicated to the phenomenon of *Ressentiment* of which I presented some results on the occasion of *The XII International Max Scheler Conference*, organized by the Max Scheler Gesellschaft e by the Nordamerikanische Max-Scheler-Gesellschaft, “Wurzeln der Technikphilosophie. Max Schelers Technik- und Zivilisationskritik in unterschiedlichen gesellschaftlichen Kontexten” (Universität Erfurt, Theologische Fakultät, 22-25 May 2013).

uncovering the peculiar affective relevance of revenge, and a very short lexical explanation.² Let's start just from this last point.

Scheler's term "Vergeltung" in fact, that I translated into Italian as "Retribuzione" (the English equivalent of which is "Retribution"), is not immediately translatable into other languages just owing to its semantic polyvalence: "indemnity" for damages, or rather, for wrongs; "recompense"; "revenge"; "reprisal" etc. In short, I decided for "Retribution" because a fundamental (but not the one and only) element that marks "Vergeltung", in Scheler's sense too, is "to give somebody tit for tat"³, or "to pay somebody in their own coin". And it is just this element of proportional punishment of "Vergeltung" as juridical model that is shared – in Scheler's approach to penalty – from genuine "revenge". So, original "revenge", that presents itself as one of the meanings of Scheler's "Vergeltung", is indicative of an attempt to punish certainly the offender, but in an act not deprived of an element of justice, that is to say, in line at least with the *law of retaliation*: "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth".

I think that to enlighten the relationship, even though distant, that subsists between criminal justice (vital, and not moral justice, as we will see) and revenge can have an interesting implication. It makes evident the fact that revenge is not reducible to a senseless event and, as a consequence, cannot be undervalued as a suddenly explosion of anger. Although it cannot be justified, especially in its very serious criminal versions, has always at least an appearance of reason, or it claims to be somehow "just", otherwise is not a "revenge", but something else. With due caution that the different outlook (from reality to fiction) involves, this crucial aspect of revenge explains the sympathy that each and every one of us, especially children, may feel towards genuine and good avengers, idealistic and somewhat romantic, founded in fictions or in films like Zorro.

Zorro reveals the importance of the sensibility to injustices, to wrongs and, remaining in the boundaries of a genuine justice felt at axiological and affective level, shows the threshold beyond which the "good" becomes indeed "bad" and "evil", and the "justice" becomes "injustice".

Investigating the nature of revenge, on the other hand, allows the understanding of the limits that this experience has, apart from its pretensions, and to determine the relations, not always "naïf", that it establishes eventually with acts, sometimes contextual to it, of which we need to appraise the value's importance and the role that they play in the possible refinement of affective sensibility. More explicitly: are there any acts axiologically superior to revenge and thus able to defeat revenge itself

2 In this context I can only hint at the question of "Vergeltung" in Scheler's retributive term with which I am concerning just in relation to "Ressentiment".

3 Scheler (2009^o, 362).

and the virulence of the grudge or of any other negative feeling states and states of excitement that may accompany it?

Answering affirmatively to this question could also mean, in my opinion, that we do not necessarily have to resign ourselves to the so considered classic Nietzsche's thesis, according to which

«All instincts that do not discharge themselves outwardly *turn inward*.»⁴⁴

If it is possible e.g. that a person renounces to take revenge for the wrongs, renouncing consequently to do evil, in its turn, to its evil-doer or to some members of the evil-doer's family or of society who have some friendly relation to it, then that person has not inevitably to do evil to itself. I mean to say that we must not generalize the idea that an unsuccessful, or rather, not wanted any more act of revenge (towards the others), is transformed into a kind of masochism - at least where exist personal resources to escape from instincts of species and from automatisms of the body and, in the worst hypothesis, from an anonymous and fragmentary body (a sum of cells, organs or atomistic sensations) that answers only to sensorial solicitations. So, to cultivate our affective sensibility - if this training process is plausible - means cultivate in the first place our body in order to refinement the vital self-sense, because our individuality and our capability of truthfulness begin exactly from here: from our living body and from way of making a correct experience of it in the world among others.

I would like to say, *in the sign of Zorro*, that it is possible „to execute the revenge“, to kill every raising revenge, particularly when it is indeed a „bad“ revenge, and to learn to feel the value-differences and the value-nuances (good, bad, evil, violent, innocent, just etc.); to feel, too, real wickedness and injustice in order to fight them. Like Zorro.

1.
A “Wild Joy“
Revenge as a
Real Emotion
“Noir” or as a
Mere State of
Excitement?

Revenge is a “dish best served cold “; it is “bitter” or crossed every now and then by a gleam of “wild joy“. Certain persons really have “thirst for revenge” or they have a strong “desire for revenge”. Other persons “harbour thoughts of revenge”. The spilled blood “calls down vengeance” and it sounds like a paradox, but even “justice *rights* wrongs”.

All these are popular expressions, of course; a lively language and a little metaphorical that finds out, nevertheless, some truths. It is true, for instance - and contemporary empirical research, in particular cognitive psychology, confirms it - that revenge is a *sensory-vital* phenomenon. Although the “hunger”, restrained in order to best relish the dish, the “thirst” and the “desire” or appetites do not allude certainly to some form

4 Nietzsche (19942, 2, Section 16).

of cannibalism and have not just a literal meaning, they open a universe of tastes, of primitive and complex, rather ambiguous, pleasures and emotions, like the "wild joy" or similar emotions like that German language calls "Schadenfreude", that refers at least to a being endowed with a body and with particular cognitivo-emotional states and reactions. It is well-known, moreover, in the world of art, and wisely employed by film techniques and by all times literature, the "noir" character of revenge. So it is an expression of the living-body, and more exactly, of an individual of whom revenge reveals the behavioural dimension and his potentially criminality. Certain facts besides, like homicides, above all those particularly violent, "calls down vengeance" and there are "crimes", so to speak, "that cry to God for vengeance". This aspect is very important because it seems to point to a real object of vengeance and of rising vengeance, that is to say, of the impulse of revenge (*Racheimpuls*). In other words, genuine revenge or driving tendencies for revenge would have an intentional character that would exclude every possible attempt to identify this emotional experience with a simple, deprived of intentionality, sensory affection or with a mere state of excitement (*Affekt*) like ire or anger.

1.1. Revenge and Justice According to Scheler Retributive Theory of Punishment (RTP)⁵, we can define this aspect of revenge, that approaches it dangerously to a primitive forme of justice,

"Istance" or «demande for atonement»⁶.

Referring to a "third entity" above the harmed person and the evil doer (God or same Judge), this aspect would seem to confirm, at the same time, the strange connection that the popular language glimpses between revenge and justice – a peculiar type of justice ("justice *rights* wrongs").

1.2. Take One's Revenge, to Forgive, to Repent, to Deceive Oneself If on one hand revenge evokes, in the collective imaginary, at least the big deed of an avenger even if not that of a real judge or that of a moral ruler of the world, on the other hand revenge, in its milder version, evokes forgiveness - as Gilda reminds us in *Rigoletto*. An act, that of forgiveness, that from the religious point of view can come out of a strong faith, but from the moral or also only from the psychological point of view can come out of a long maturation's process and of a deep meditation, often suffered. The question of forgiveness, of when and how the victim can forgive

5 Cf. Scheler (2009⁸, 355-369).

6 Scheler (2009⁸, 363).

the offender or the guilty; the question, in other words, of the cognitive modulators of forgiveness and of factors that make this process easier or make it difficult, is the hard core of the present psychological and psychoanalytic research.⁷ It is in the ambit of this important debate in which are discussed, besides, the therapeutic relevance of forgiveness and the theory of forgiveness as «indemnity for damages» and as contrary attitude to revenge and *ressentiment*⁸; it is just in this context, that emerges clearly, even though at empirical level, a very crucial problem that Scheler himself has faced on moral plan or on that of psychological phenomenology. I am referring to the problem of axiological Illusions.⁹ There are, in fact – limiting ourselves to forgiveness or to acts, as repentance, often involved in meditation that can flow into forgiveness – cases of «pseudo-forgiveness».¹⁰ It is possible to forgive the offender only for reasons, for instance, absolutely extrinsic in comparison with personal and genuine way of feeling: obligations or moral imperatives without inner participation and without axiological contents; masked forms of revenge as the popular language again reveals (“forgiveness is the revenge of the magnanimous”) etc. Analogously, it is possible to confuse repentance with «painful effects and subsequent displeasure which result from excessive enjoyment»¹¹ or to live repentance as a kind of self-revenge or self-punishment.¹² In Scheler’s meaning of terms, it is a matter in these cases of “illusions”, “deceptions”, of “false” moral experiences whose falsehood depends either on «axiological blindness»¹³, so to speak, or – at level of explicit conscience - on hypocrisy and conscious and genuine lies. In this world of “crimes and misdeed”, of little or big illusions; in this web of lies and potential revenges, of revenges won by possible forgiveness and repentances; in this world, as it is outlined, and in which justice is often invoked, results evident the thin line that crosses, and not seldom connects (as consequences or premisses¹⁴, or else in those rare instants that have the extraordinary lightness of the grace), the pointed affective and conscience phenomenons: revenge, justice, forgiveness and repentance. In my opinion, they plunge their roots in that original experience of the life that, in normal conditions, is always “mine” or “yours”, and always meant as a unity.

7 See Barcaccia, Mancini (2013).

8 Barcaccia, Mancini (2013, 74).

9 See Scheler (1972^a a).

10 Barcaccia, Mancini (2013, 98-99).

11 Scheler (1973, 177).

12 Scheler (20006, 31).

13 Scheler (19725 a, 265)

14 Like in the simple way of saying: “If you say you’re sorry, I’ll forgive you”. It alludes to a general - even not necessary - rule, in accordance to which the forgiveness of the victim presupposes the repentance of the offender.

All intuitions of the common sense have to find, of course, a genuine phenomenological verification or denial (*via* Scheler), and perhaps – even if not necessarily – an empirical verification or denial in the following analysis. Now it is possible to define precisely the programmatic lines of the present inquiry about this particular emotional phenomenon in which consists the revenge.

2. Revenge: Its Ontological Status and Its Place Among Feelings

One of the aims of this paper is not only to provide an elucidation of revenge but also, indirectly, to shed light upon a specific feeling's class, namely that of the vital reaction answers or responses (*Vitaleantwortreaktion*) of behavioural's type. Following Scheler, particularly his Theory of Emotions, we will uncover in fact that revenge is really an *emotion* and belongs, in a certain sense, to the group of feeling in question; to the same group, to which belongs among other things, in its positive or negative valence, "to be glad or to be sad about something"¹⁵ too.

A necessary step to make so as not to draw rash conclusions is to try to understand what revenge is not. Let us put to interest Scheler's extraordinary and very thin analysis of emotional life and of the so-called "ombres de l'âme"¹⁶ in order to circumscribe this vital phenomenon. Revenge is a little neglected in scientific literature on Scheler's thought; nevertheless it witnesses, with its very presence in major Scheler's works, how this singular phenomenologist had seriously reflected on it, on life – including its ambiguities – and on embodied human existence.

In the first place we have got to distinguish revenge from other experiences, above all affective, in order to catch its nature and its specificity; in the second place we have to state more exactly the analogies and the differences that subsist between revenge and retribution (*Vergeltung*).

2.1. Revenge is not a sensory affection (*sinnliches Gefühl*)

The fact that revenge or an impulse of revenge cannot coincide with a sensory affection is evident of course. Provided that we take a glance, in Scheler's terms, at main essential traits of a sensory affection, we realize that it would mean really "to slap the experience" – as Scheler could say – to affirm the contrary. A sensory affections, like a sensory pain and a sensory agreeableness, in fact is¹⁷:

- a. *Extended and localized in specific parts of our body;*
- b. *given essentially as a state, namely, lacks every form of intentionality;*

15 Cf. e.g. Scheler (20098, 118, 264)

16 Scheler is a real pioneer of research on "philosophy of negative emotions" too. On "ombres de l'âme" see at present Tappolet, Teroni, Konzelman Kiv, eds. (2013). On *ressentiment*, envy, jealousy, thirst for revenge see Waldenfels (2006, 275-296).

17 Scheler (20098, 335-340).

- c. *has not relation to the person and is related only indirectly to the ego and to the living body seen as whole (in its "unity-identity");*
- d. *an actual fact;*
- e. *punctual, without duration or continuity of sense;*
- f. *among all feelings, the one least disturbed by attention;*
- g. *subject to practical and arbitrary changes.*

Even if we consider only a single characteristic among these, e.g. (a.), we can exclude that revenge is a sensory affection. A person does not feel revenge in specific parts of its body, as it feels e.g. the bite of a mosquito, but it is completely the revenge's pray. So the "wild joy", that this individual can betray, is a joy of all its living body.

2.2. Revenge is not a Vital Sense

Less intuitive is the idea that revenge is not simply a vital feeling. How can we set up the claim to make of revenge something else from a sense of our body (*Lebensgefühl*), as *state*, and from a vital sense (*Lebensgefühl*), as *function*? If revenge is not a simple feeling of well-being or unwell and appears rather as a more complex attitude or as an inclination of human beings etc., it shares, in its bearer, with the well-being or the unwell «a unitary consciousness»¹⁸ of the *living body* «from whose totality separate organic sensations and feelings emerge only secondarily from the background, a it were, that founds them»¹⁹. From this point of view, an individual which makes experience of a vital pulse tendency to revenge can feel that this body with determinate characteristics, able to react so an so, to advance the satisfaction that could derive from its action, is exactly "its" living body, and not the body of an another person. The so-called "appetite" of that individual can never reduce itself to a function as the appetite in literal sense because is not a mere vital function, but has surely a nuance really psychological and a more cognitive character tied exactly to its definite object.

Unlike a vital sense, revenge refers more directly to *ego*; an aspect this, that approaches it to a purely psychic feeling, as a joy or as sadness of the "soul", from which, however, it distinguishes itself for its more strictly tie with life, as the "wild joy", that can accompany a criminal intention, reveals in its refer to a living for certain aspects still instinctive like an animal.

Like a vital sense, revenge is always directed toward an object: in all cases of familiar feud, too, or in those of blood-revenge, when e.g. a member of the same family of the offender is shot, is always the same object to which

¹⁸ Scheler (1973, 339).

¹⁹ Scheler (1973, 339).

the evil-doer is directed. In other words, the family or a member of the offender's family is seen as the very same offender, in which the family or the member in question puts itself as an *organ*.²⁰ And when revenge is defined improperly as "objectless", one wants to say only that revenge concerns, not an object circumscribed, but the whole environment in which the offence is been caused.²¹ A revenge objectless or without a definite object is already something else, and precisely, a form of *ressentiment*.²² The firm intentional character of revenge is just what makes of it something really different from a state of excitement.²³ Although it can have some reason, an explosion of anger or wrath e.g. can have only a vague object; it is rather a simple irritation due to a negative stimulus, a sudden and out of control episode.

Like in a sense of its body, besides, in revenge or in impulse of revenge a person feels its health and the risks that it could run in the future; it feels indeed its «*life itself*»²⁴ and, in the vigour, that has however tragic effects when it flows into violence, its growth.

By synthesis, although revenge is neither a vital sense nor a sense of our body, it likens them very much. Especially, in its pulse origin, that is to say, in impulse in which it announces itself, revenge betrays its vital nature. Impulse of revenge, in fact, is a vital phenomenon analogue to "courage", and is as such a «pulse reaction» or «pulse reaction response».²⁵

2.3. Revenge is not a Feeling of the Personality

As we have seen, revenge refers to *ego* and has an intentional character. Consequently we can indeed inscribe it in the group of feelings in literal sense (*Gefühle*).²⁶ For "Feelings in literal sense" I mean, with Scheler, *emotions*, on the hand, and *feelings of the personality* or *spiritual feelings* (*geistige Gefühle*) from the other. For its "wild" nature and for the pointed reasons, revenge is not a genuine spiritual feeling of course. For its *reactive nature*, and for the fact that it can be controlled, revenge is not even a genuine feeling of the personality, like bliss and despair, which, on the contrary, «*spontaneously issues forth from the depth of our person*»²⁷ and is absolutely «*beyond any volitional control*».²⁸

20 Scheler (19725 b, 39-40).

21 Scheler (19725 b, 39-40).

22 Scheler (19725 b, 65).

23 See e.g. Scheler (20098, 263-264; 362)

24 Scheler (1973, 340).

25 Scheler (20098, 124).

26 Scheler (20098, 263).

27 Scheler (1973, 337).

28 Scheler (1973, 337).

2.3.1.
Impulse of
Revenge is not
an Impulse for
Defence

"To be reactive", besides, is not only opposite to "to be spontaneous", but also to "to be active". So revenge, as impulse, is different from other impulses, like impulse for defence or impulse for counter-attack that are, instead, active and aggressive.²⁹ I find particularly interesting and instructive the distinction, apparently not much important, that Scheler underlines between these impulses. Any attempt at defence oneself e.g., above all when our life, or the well-being of a collectivity, is at stake, is positive and necessary and is preferable to passivity. "Defence" has surely an adaptive valence, as the equivalent German word "Verteidigung" seems to reveal. Its meaning includes that, too, of a "defence of own boundaries" or of a "fortress" and allude, consequently, to an attempt at survival or self-preservation inside those boundaries themselves. On the contrary, impulse of revenge, that has an adaptive valence too, does not exhaust yet in this sense. It points out an excess, a "surplus" of living body itself in comparison to the functions or reactions that usually one inclines to attribute it: to work essentially as an indicator of well-being, of dangers etc. It constitutes a confirmation of the fact that the living body is not at all anonym and able only to answer instinctively, but also to express itself beyond the universal needs of the species. Living body can lie, can feel itself wounded or injured and can react to wrongs, can allude to a way of living with more dignity in comparison to that way of living (or to die) to which an offender would have to reduce it. From this point of view, too, we see then, even if indistinctly, the underground line that passes dangerously from impulse of revenge to a kind of justice or at least to its claim.

2.4.
Revenge is
Already an
Emotion...

Let's remind a last aspect of revenge: this negative vital experience shares something of those specific vital reaction answers that consist in "to be glad or to be sad about something". They are peculiar *conducts*, ways of behaving that have not a strong intentional character – and in this sense they distinguish themselves from revenge – but have however a fairly importance. They show that the value-qualities constitute certain understanding and meaning relations that «are not simply empirically contingent or dependent on the individual psychic causality of individuals³⁰». These value-qualities relations «demand certain qualities in emotional "reaction of response of the same type, and these reactions in a certain sense "reach their goal" in the value-qualities»³¹. Revenge has just a behavioural's trait too. In a certain sense it belongs

²⁹ Scheler (19725 b, 39).

³⁰ Scheler (1973, 258).

³¹ Scheler (1973, 258).

(as affective impulse) to feeling's class of the vital reaction answers or responses of behavioural's type. In another sense it is a "threshold-phenomenon" because it is already beyond the vital senses and the senses of our body, but is not yet a purely psychic feeling or an emotion of the soul: it is a psycho-physiologic emotion or rather is *already* «an emotion founded in a given state of affairs of negative value»³² and shares with *retribution* the "instance or «demande for atonement arising» from this state:

*Thus it appears to be the "spilled blood" itself that "cries out for atonement", apart from any reference to a possible agent who could be the object of revenge or retribution. Both revenge and retribution, however, are equally founded in the experience of this demand... True, one who feels revenge seeks compensation for his harm as his harm, in contrast to one who demands retribution; but it does so because this harm also appears to demand atonement irrespective of his displeasure. It is for this reason alone that a deed for revenge can sometimes be felt as "duty", and that even the lack of feeling of revenge can in certain cases be felt as a moral deficiency... But the idea of punishment is not based on revenge; it has its spiritual origins in retribution and demand for atonement.*³³

3. Living Body and Truthfulness

Keeping constantly in the mind the more general questions that I raised and the datum context, I can conclude provisionally:

Our capability of truthfulness begins from our living body

Speaking of "truthfulness", I do not mean to refer to a propositional truth of course, but to a "truth" *before of the truth*, of which we can be or not be able, and such as will condition not only the truth or the falsity of our judgements, but also that of our behaviours and conducts, our actions and our moral acts. There are truths or falsehoods, concerning sensory perception, that seem to depend on objects, as in cases in which a simple appearance pretends to be something that in reality is not³⁴, like a wax statue or a manikin that seem to pretend e.g. to be a person. Analogously there are truthfulness and falseness, concerning emotional-axiological, that seem to depend (and in actual fact depend) on our body. Our body can lie and deceive us as when we believe to have forgiven an offender only because we do not feel, at vital level, any form of revenge or *ressentiment* towards it. Not always we realize that our generosity or our mildness as "sacrificial

³² Scheler (1973, 362).

³³ Scheler (1973, 362). I have changed some terms of the english translation e.g. the term "reprisal" with "retribution".

³⁴ Scheler (19725 a, 226).

lambs" is not really "our", but it is due to a "blindness" of our body and of correlate feeling and emotions. What can be mistaken from the outside for an act that rises from an extreme sensitivity or true piety, is in reality the fruit of insensibility, of the "silence" and the "benumbment" of a body, and after all of a vital sense's decline. This phenomenon is consequently very different from a hypocrisy that wears voluntarily a mask.

Only a genuine, true *forgiveness* can "execute the revenge" but - with the living Scheler's voice - «Wer keinerlei Rache fühlt, der kann ja auch nicht "verzeihen"...»³⁵

Sensibility to injustices, adequately cultivated, contributes to our vital self-sense, too, and of its health. It contributes to the identity of our living body.

35 Scheler (19725 b, 93).

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