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ACTS OF
RELIGION
JACQUES DERRIDA

Edited and with an Introduction by
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(Matthew 5:44) and according to his example: "While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son" (Romans 5:10).

- 4) Thus, counting on the divine grace, these Christians want to consecrate themselves to the salvation of their brothers, and in this hope of salvation, to give to Jesus Christ, in the name of their brothers, the faith, the Adoration and the love that, because of their imperfect knowledge of the Gospels, they are prevented from giving it themselves. Salvation does not necessarily mean external conversion. It is already a lot to obtain that a greater number belong to the soul of the Church, that they live and die in a state of grace.
- 5) Through these characteristics, the Badaliya distinguishes itself from the various associations and leagues of prayers already existing in Europe and with which the members of the Badaliya gratefully unite.³⁷

The idea of a sacred deposit and of a guardian of the deposit recurs regularly, for example in a letter to Mary Kahil, probably from 1934, where Massignon defends himself against the accusation of religious syncretism and where the logic of the deposit is interlaced with that of the mystical substitution and of the hostage as *disappropriation* (this is Massignon's word).³⁸

The word *hostage*, always emphasized, is applied by Massignon to himself. He wants to be and says himself to be a voluntary hostage, for example in another letter of 1947 to Mary Kahil where Massignon writes, "Hold on to your internal vocation to intercede for these Muslim souls. With me, you have been devoted to them by your compassion for the renegade Luis de Cuadra, to whom I had become *hostage* [*dont j'étais constitué l'otage*]."³⁹

It is not only the word *hostage* that recalls (*mutatis mutandis* and with each difference being vigilantly respected) Levinas's discourse, starting with *Otherwise than Being*. It is also the word *persecution*. I am hostage and I am persecuted, says Massignon, for example in a letter where he speaks of a "Islamico-Christian prayer" and even of a "Islamico-Christian prayer front." Here, then, I will read this letter before letting you think about this strange configuration of Judeo-Islamico-Christian hospitality, about peace too, but also about the war of hostages that is waged in it with pitiless compassion. "I am persecuted in all kinds of ways at the moment, but I am at peace. I was born into this world in order to share in Love and also in the Cross. Love is an inexorable fire and it burns like Sodom, for Sodom, for this world which tears itself in the midst of the love of God. (. . .) I am giving one

37. Quoted in *L'hospitalité sacrée*, 373-76.

38. *Translator's Note*: The letter is entitled "Depositum Custodi" in Massignon, *L'hospitalité sacrée*, 171-73.

39. Letter of June 29, 1947, in Massignon, *L'hospitalité sacrée*, 241.

of your friends some documents about the supreme effort that I attempted with my admirable Muslim friend, *Sheikh* el Okbi, in order that the Islamico-Christian prayer front maintain and affirm itself in the East, under the sign of 'Issa Ibn Maryam' (Jesus son of Mary).⁴⁰

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The question of forgiveness—the immense, classical but also impossible question of forgiveness, pregnant with an abyssal history—appeared to provoke us, to push us to gather and to formalize the difficulties, the paradoxes and aporias holding us on the “lookout.” I would like to return to this question for a few moments, not in order to pretend to be done or even to begin with it, but rather in order to reinscribe the hand that has been dealt [*la donne*] in our trajectory, between Levinas and Massignon, and on the way toward an approach of the Muslim culture of hospitality.

First of all, regarding what links the test and the ordeal [*l'épreuve*] of hospitality to that of forgiveness, one should not only say that forgiveness granted to the other is the supreme gift and therefore hospitality par excellence. Forgiving would be opening for and smiling to the other, whatever his fault or his indignity, whatever the offense or even the threat. Whoever asks for hospitality, asks, in a way, for forgiveness and whoever offers hospitality, grants forgiveness—and forgiveness must be infinite or it is nothing: it is excuse or exchange.

But if there is a scene of forgiveness at the heart of hospitality, between hôte and hôte, host and guest,⁴¹ if there is failing, fault, offense, even sin, to be forgiven on the very threshold, if I may say so, of hospitality, it is not only because I must [*je dois*] forgive the other in order to welcome him, because the welcoming one [*l'accueillant*] must forgive the welcomed one [*l'accueilli*]. It is also because, inversely and first of all, the welcoming one must ask for forgiveness from the welcomed one even prior to the former's own having to forgive. For one is always failing, lacking hospitality [*car on est toujours en faute d'hospitalité*]: one never gives enough. Not only because welcoming is welcoming the infinite, and therefore welcoming, as Levinas says, beyond my capacity of welcoming [*ma capacité d'accueil*] (something that results in my always being behind, in arrears, always inadequate to my hôte and to the hospitality I owe him), but also because hospitality, as we saw, does not only consist in welcoming a guest, in welcoming according to the invitation, but rather, following the visitation, according to the surprise of the visitor, unforeseen,

40. Letter of April 30, 1958, in Massignon, *L'hospitalité sacrée*, 305.

41. *Translator's Note*: The words *host* and *guest* are in English in the text.

unforeseeable [*imprévu, imprévisible*], unpredictable, unexpected and unpredictable,⁴² unawaited [*inattendu*]. Hospitality consists in welcoming the other that does not warn me of his coming. In regard of this messianic surprise, in regard of what must thus tear any horizon of expectation, I am always, if I can say so, always and structurally, lacking, at fault [*en défaut, en faute*], and therefore condemned to be forgiven [*voué à me faire pardonner*], or rather to have to ask for forgiveness for my lack of preparation, for an irreducible and constitutive unpreparedness.

In both cases—that I cannot ever give enough to the welcomed or awaited guest nor expect enough [*m'attendre assez*] or give enough to the unexpected visitor or arriving one—in these two hypotheses, which are, by the way, structurally heterogeneous to the rapport to the other, I am positioned so as to abandon the other, so as not to give him enough, and thus to leave him abandoned. Therefore, I have to ask for forgiveness for abandonment [*j'ai donc à demander pardon de l'abandon*], forgiveness for not giving, forgiveness for not having known how to give [*pardon de n'avoir pas su faire don*].

I will start again from this Jewish joke reported by Theodor Reik (who wrote extensively on the *Grand Pardon* and on the *Kol Nidre*).⁴³ “Two Jews, longtime enemies, meet at the synagogue, on the Day of Atonement [*le jour du Grand Pardon*]. One says to the other [as a gesture, therefore, of forgiveness —J. D.]: ‘I wish for you what you wish for me.’ The other immediately retorts: ‘Already you’re starting again?’”

An unfathomable story, a story that seems to stop on the verge of itself, a story whose development consist in interrupting itself, in paralyzing itself in order to refuse itself all *avenir*; absolute story of the unsolvable, vertiginous depth of the bottomlessness [*sans-fond*], irresistible whirlpool that carries forgiveness, the gift, and the re-giving, the re-dealing of forgiveness, to the abyss of impossibility.

How to acquit oneself of forgiveness? And does not forgiveness have to exclude all acquitting, all acquitting of oneself, all acquitting of the other?

Forgiving is surely not to call it quits, clear and discharged [*pardonnez, ce n'est sûrement pas tenir pour quitte*]. Not oneself, nor the other. This would be repeating evil, countersigning it, consecrating it, letting it be what it is, unalterable and identical to itself. No adequation is here acceptable or tolerable. What, then?

As I have said, I think that we will agree in finding this Jewish joke not only funny, but also memorable and unforgettable, precisely where it treats of this treatment of memory and the unforgettable that one calls forgiveness. Forgiveness

42. *Translator's Note*: The words *unexpected* and *unpredictable* are in English in the text.

43. *Translator's Note*: Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, is called in French “le Grand Pardon,” the Great Forgiveness. On the eve of Yom Kippur, the famous *Kol Nidre* (Aramaic, “all the vows”) is recited.

is above all not forgetting, on the contrary. There is no forgiveness without memory, certainly, but no forgiveness is reducible to an act of memory. To forgive is not to forget, above all not to forget. A story "for laughs," no doubt, but what, in it, makes us laugh, laugh or cry, and laugh through the tears or anguish?

This, no doubt, has to do first of all with economy [*épargne*], an economy that was powerfully analyzed by Freud, and by Sarah Kofman interrogating Freud.⁴⁴ By the way, in her chapter on the "three knaves [*les trois larrons*]," a note also speaks of forgiveness. It speaks of the economy of "pleasure allowed by the super-ego, the *forgiveness* of sorts that is granted by it and that brings humor closer to the manic phase, since thanks to its 'gifts [*dons*],' the diminished 'ego' finds itself if not euphoric at least inflated anew."⁴⁵

Without pursuing this direction, I will remain, for the moment, with the wild analysis of this Jewish story: two enemies make the gesture of forgiving each other, they fake it, "for laughs," but they reopen, or internally persist with, the conflict. They avow to each other [*ils s'avouent*] this inexpiable war; they symmetrically accuse each other of it. The avowal goes through a symptom rather than through a declaration, but this changes nothing of the truth: they have not disarmed; they continue to wish each other ill.

One of the allegorical powers of this story is perhaps the following: the test and ordeal that these two Jews undergo, and that which makes us laugh, is indeed the radical impossibility of forgiveness. And yet, as I have suggested earlier, in this impossible, and commonly endured as impossible, forgiveness, in this common non-forgiveness, this mutual non-forgiveness, these two Jews, face to face (with or without a third), experience, perhaps, a kind of compassion. Perhaps. And perhaps a kind of forgiveness filters unconsciously through this compassion, supposing that an unconscious forgiveness were not nonsense.

A Jew, a Jew of any time but, above all, in this century, is also someone who undergoes the test and the ordeal of the impossibility of forgiveness, of its radical impossibility. Besides, who would give this right to forgive? Who would give—and to whom—the right to forgive for the dead, and to forgive the infinite violence done to them, depriving them of burial and of name, everywhere in the world and not only in Auschwitz? And thus everywhere the unforgivable would have occurred? Besides, regarding everything for which Auschwitz remains both the proper name and the metonymy, we would have to speak of this painful but essential experience which consists in reproaching oneself as well, in front of the dead, as it were, with having survived, with being a survivor. There would be, there sometimes is, a feeling

44. Sarah Kofman, *Pourquoi rit-on ? Freud et le mot d'esprit* (Paris: Galilée, 1986), esp. 100–13.

45. Kofman, *Pourquoi*, 104; emphases added.

of guilt, muted or acute, for living, for surviving, and therefore an injunction to ask for forgiveness, to ask the dead or one knows not who, for the simple fact of being there [*être là*], alive, that is to say, for surviving, for being here, still here, always here, here where the other is no longer—and therefore to ask for forgiveness for one's being-there [*être-là*], a being there originarily guilty. Being-there: this would be asking for forgiveness; this would be to be inscribed in a scene of forgiveness, and of impossible forgiveness. If there is, in a Nietzschean or Heideggerian, even Levinasian, sense (three very different, even irreducible, senses), a kind of a priori debt or indebtedness, prior even to any contract, as Levinas would say, prior to any borrowing, then, any *existant*, any subject, any *Dasein*, is in the process of asking for forgiveness for what he is [*pour ce qu'il est*], of asking for forgiveness insofar as he is [*en tant qu'il est*]. He confesses, even when he does not confess or denies confessing. Forgiveness asked [*le pardon demandé*] does not occur at a given moment for such particular fault or unacquittable debt, but for the unacquittable that is the fact of being there. Even if forgiveness is not asked for by way of an explicit formulation, by way of an "I beg your pardon," even if it is not asked of a determined addressee, the prayer, a kind of silent "Our Father," would be operative in the murmur or the whispering of any existence, day and night, unto sleep and unto dream.

And this constancy of begged forgiveness also testifies to the impossibility of forgiveness, received or granted. If—whether or not I want to—I am always asking for forgiveness, it is because forgiveness remains denied [*refusé*], and therefore apparently impossible.

Regarding the guilt of the survivor, which is not only that of the concentration camp survivor, but, first of all, of any survivor, of anyone who is mourning, of all work of mourning—and the work of mourning is always an "I survive," and is therefore of the living in general—regarding the originary guilt of the living as survivor who must therefore be forgiven simply for the fact of living and of surviving the death of the other, I will quote a long parenthesis of Levinas in his "Cours sur la mort et le temps" (in the book *Dieu, la mort et le temps*). You will see again that the logic of substitution and of hostage is here operative. This is a parenthesis where Levinas again speaks in his own name, as it were, while in the process of pedagogically exposing Heidegger:

(Sympathy and compassion, to suffer for the other or "to die a thousand deaths" for the other [*l'autre*], have as their condition of possibility a more radical substitution for an other [*autrui*]). This would be a responsibility for another in bearing his misfortune or his end *as if one were guilty of causing it* [*comme si on en était coupable*; underscored in italics: one thus asks for forgiveness, "as if"? —J. D.]. This is the ultimate proximity. *To survive as a guilty one*. In this sense, the sacrifice for another

[*autrui*] would create an other relation with the death of the other: a responsibility that would perhaps answer the question of why one can die. In the guiltiness of the survivor, the death of the other [*l'autre*] concerns me [*est mon affaire*]. My death is my *part* in the death of the other, and in my death I die the death that is my fault. The death of the other is not only a moment of the mineness of my ontological function.)⁴⁶

This survivor's guilt for the death of the other, this forgiveness asked a priori by the living as survivor—this is what, making us *a priori* guilty of the death of the other, transforms this death into something other than a natural death: forgiveness begged confesses [*avoue*] guilt and transforms the death of the other into the equivalent of a murder. When someone dies (when I mourn him, that is to say, when it is someone whom I am supposed to love, whom I am supposed to hold dear, someone close or one of my own, in all the senses of these words), then my sadness and my guilt signify that I am responsible for this death, that I feel responsible, as one says, for this death which is therefore a murder. They signify that I have killed, symbolically or not, the other, or, in any case, that I have “let him die.” As soon as I feel responsible for a death, it means that I interpret it as a murder. There always is at least nonassistance to an endangered person in the phantasm that links us to the death of our own [*qui nous rapporte à la mort des nôtres*]. I say “our own” not because I know or can determine first what this means (loved ones, family, compatriots, etc.). No, it is the opposite, rather. My own, our own, are those who never die of natural death since I accuse myself of having killed them or having let them die. My own are the victims of murder, those who do not die of natural death, since, actively or passively, I feel I have lent my hand to their death. This is also what one calls love. Thus I would define my own, those whom I hold dear: they are those who always die by my fault, those of whom I ask forgiveness for their death which is my fault. Such, at least, is the ineluctable empire of the phantasm at the origin of meaning.

One also finds in Blanchot and in Levinas this thought of death that is always a murder. In Blanchot I do not remember where—even though I have quoted this sentence I no longer know where.⁴⁷ In Levinas, still in the “Cours sur la mort et le temps,” “In the death of another, in his face that is exposition to death, it is not the passage from one quiddity to another that is announced; in death is *the very event*

46. Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo; slightly altered (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000) 39; *Dieu, la mort et le temps* (Paris: Grasset, 1993), 50. Levinas is here commenting on *Being and Time*, §47.

47. *Translator's Note*: Derrida may be referring here to Blanchot as he is quoted in “Living On: Border Lines”: “There is death and murder (words which I defy anyone to distinguish . . .)” (J. Derrida, “Living On: Border Lines,” trans. James Hulbert, in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom et al. (New York: Continuum, 1979)/*Parages* (Paris: Galilée 1986), 163, quoting Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995], 71).

of passing (our language says, moreover, "he has passed" ["*il passe*"]) with its own acuteness that is its scandal (each death is the first death). One must think of all the murder there is in death: every death is a murder, is premature, and there is the responsibility of the survivor."⁴⁸ But the impossibility of forgiveness, let us not hide this from ourselves, must be thought yet otherwise, and unto the most radical root [*la racine la plus radicale*] of its paradox, in the very formation of a concept of forgiveness. What a strange concept! Since it does not resist the impossibility of what wants to be conceived in it, since it explodes or implodes in it, it is an entire chain of concepts which explodes with it, and even the concept of concept that thus finds itself undergoing the test and ordeal of its essential precariousness, of its finitude and its deconstructability.

The impossibility of forgiveness offers itself to thought, in truth, as its sole possibility. Why is forgiveness impossible? Not merely difficult for a thousand psychological reasons, but absolutely impossible? Simply because what there is to forgive must be, and must remain, unforgivable. If forgiveness is possible, if there is forgiveness, it must forgive the unforgivable—such is the logical aporia. But, in spite of appearances, this is not only a cold and formal contradiction or logical dead end. It is a tragedy of compassion and of inter-subjectivity as destiny of the hostage, hôte, and madness of substitution of which we speak with Levinas and Massignon. If one had to forgive only what is forgivable, even excusable, *venial*, as one says, or insignificant, then one would not forgive. One would excuse, forgive, erase, one would not be granting forgiveness. If, in the process of any given transformation, the fault, the evil, the crime are attenuated or extenuated to the point of veniality, if the effects of the wound were less hurting, were even accompanied by some surplus of jouissance, then that which itself becomes forgivable frees itself of all guilt [*se met hors de cause*] and needs no forgiveness. The forgiveness of the forgivable does not forgive anything: it is not forgiveness. In order to forgive, one must [*il faut*] therefore forgive the unforgivable, but the unforgivable that remains [*demeuré*] unforgivable, the worst of the worst: the unforgivable that resists any process of transformation of me or of the other, that resists any alteration, any historical reconciliation that would change the conditions or the circumstances of the judgment. Whether remorse or repentance, the ulterior purification of the guilty has nothing to do with this. Besides, there is no question of forgiving a guilty one, a subject subject to transformation beyond the fault. Rather, it is a matter of forgiving the fault itself—which must remain unforgivable in order to call for forgiveness on its behalf. But to forgive the unforgivable—is this not, all logic considered, impossible? If it remains thus impossible, forgiveness must therefore *do the impossible*; it must undergo the

48. Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, 72/*Dieu, la mort et le temps*, 85.

test and ordeal of its own impossibility in forgiving the unforgivable. It must therefore undergo the test and ordeal, merge [*se confondre*] with the very test and ordeal of this aporia or paradox: the possibility, if it is possible and if there is such, the possibility of the impossible. And the impossible of the possible.

Here perhaps is a condition that forgiveness shares with the gift [*une condition que le pardon partage avec le don*—and therefore with hospitality, which gives without return or else is nothing. Beyond the formal analogy, this perhaps also means that one affixes its condition of impossibility to the other: the gift to forgiveness or forgiveness to the gift, hospitality to forgiveness and forgiveness to hospitality—hospitality as the opposite of abandonment. Not to mention that one must also be forgiven for the gift (which cannot avoid the risk of causing pain, of doing wrong [*risquer de faire mal, de faire le mal*], for example in giving death) and that a gift remains perhaps more unforgivable than nothing in the world [*plus impardonnable que rien au monde*].

The question that imposed itself on me one day (what is “to give in the name of the other?” “Who knows what we do when we give in the name of the other?”) to suggest that here was perhaps the only chance of the gift—doesn’t it let itself be translated by forgiveness? If I forgive in my name, my forgiveness expresses what I am capable of, me, and this decision (which is therefore no longer a decision) does no more than deploy my power and abilities, the potential energy of my aptitudes, predicates, and character traits. Nothing is more unforgivable, more haughty [*hautain*] sometimes, more self-assured than the “I forgive you.” (We shall encounter again this theme of height [*hauteur*].) I can no more decide, what is called deciding, in my name, than I can forgive in my name but only in the name of the other, there where alone I am capable neither of deciding nor of forgiving. What must be [*il faut*], therefore, is that I forgive what is not mine to forgive, not the power of giving or forgiving: what must be is that I forgive beyond me [*il faut que je pardonne au-delà de moi*] (this is close to what Levinas says, that I must welcome the infinite, and this is the first hospitality, beyond the capacity of the I—which is obviously the impossible itself: how could I do what I cannot do? How to do the impossible? Only the other in me can do it, and decide—this would be to let him do it [*le laisser faire*], without the other doing it simply in my place: here is the unthinkable of substitution. Perhaps, one must [*peut-être faut-il*] think substitution from these limit-experiences, possible-impossible, the impossible of the possible, that are the decision, the gift, forgiveness—and what I want to signal here is that the allusions, at least, to forgiveness in Levinas and Massignon are remarkable). And that this, this gift, this forgiveness, this decision, would be done in the name of the other does not exonerate in any way my freedom or my responsibility, on the contrary.

The impossibility of the possible, the possible of the impossible: here is a definition that resembles what one often gives for death, Heidegger in particular. And there is nothing fortuitous in this. We have to think this affinity, therefore, between the impossibility named death and the impossibility named forgiveness, between the gift of death and the gift of forgiveness as possibility of the impossible, possibility of the impossible hospitality. It is a little as if "hospitality," the name *hospitality*, came to name [*surnommer*], but also to give a kind of proper name to this opening of the possible onto the impossible, and reciprocally: when hospitality takes place, the impossible becomes possible but *as* impossible. The impossible, for me, for an "I," for what is "my own" or is properly my own in general.

For where is forgiveness more impossible, and therefore possible *as* impossible, than beyond the border between one living and one dead? How could the living forgive the dead [*comment un vivant pourrait-il pardonner à un mort*]? What sense and what gift would there be in a forgiveness that can no longer hope to reach its destination, except inside oneself [*sinon au-dedans de soi*], toward the other [*vers l'autre*] that is welcomed or rescued as a narcissistic ghost inside oneself? And reciprocally, how can the living hope to be forgiven by the dead or by a specter inside itself? One can follow the consequence and consistency of this logic to the infinite.

Well then, I wage that this limit which cannot be crossed [*infranchissable*]*—and nonetheless is crossed insofar as it cannot be crossed [et franchie pourtant comme infranchissable]*, in the enfranchisement of the uncrossed that cannot be crossed [*dans l'affranchissement de l'infranchissement de l'infranchi*]*—is the very line that our two Jews have crossed, with or without confession, without repentance, regarding their mutual accusation. To avow, to share, to confide in each other this test and ordeal which cannot be crossed [cette épreuve infranchissable] of the unforgivable, to describe oneself as unforgivable for not forgiving—this is perhaps not forgiveness, since forgiveness seems impossible, even there where it takes place, but it is to bear with [compatir avec] the other in the test and ordeal of the impossible.*

This would be here—here we are—the ultimate compassion. And this compassion is perhaps also the very test of substitution: to be one at the place of the other, the hostage and the *hôte* of the other; therefore the subject of the other, subject to the other, there where not only cannot places be exchanged—insofar as they remain unexchangeable and where everything withdraws from a logic of exchange—but where this unicity, this irreplaceability of the nonexchange poses itself, affirms itself, tests and suffers itself, in substitution. I am *like* [*comme*] the other, there where I cannot be, and could never be *like* him, in his resemblance, his identification or in his place. There where there is room [*place*] for the replacement of what remains irreplaceable. There is where we say I, him, her and me, here is what says

“I,” the same and the other, and this cease only at death. What also allows to think that this play of substitution, which resembles an exchange of place between two inexchangeable absolutes, is perhaps also the first intrusion of the third in the face-to-face, this intrusion of which we have underscored that it was at once ineluctable and a priori, archi- or preoriginary, an intrusion not occurring to the dual but *con-naissant* with it, knowing it and being-born-together with it, insinuating itself in it from the first instant—and immediately poses, without waiting, the question of justice linked to the third. But in one stroke, as we saw, betraying, by demand of justice, the fidelity to the other’s singularity, the absolute and infinite, finite-infinite singularity of the other. This is what I have called the congenital perjury of justice, justice [*le juste*] as perjury. But this is also where I have to ask for forgiveness for being just, to ask forgiveness of the other, of every other; where, for justice, I have to take account of the other of the other, of another other, of a third. Forgiveness for infidelity at the heart of fidelity, for perjury at the heart of sworn faith [*foi jurée*—it would suffice to say “at the heart,” period. Perjury is a heart, it is at the heart of the heart, and it is from this tragedy, which “discords” the heart in its very accord [*qui désaccorde le coeur dans l’accord même*], that the prayer of mercy [*miséricorde*] rises, even for the nonbeliever, and even if he knows nothing of it. As soon as there is substitution, and as soon as there is a third [*un troisième*], I am called by justice, by responsibility, but I also betray justice and responsibility. I have to ask, therefore, for forgiveness even before committing a determinable fault. One can call this original sin prior to any original sin, prior to the event, real or mythical, real or phantasmatic, of any original sin. Since it is from this substitution that subjectivity (in the sense Levinas gives to it) is determined, subjectivity as hôte or subjectivity as hostage, one must indeed think this subjectivity-substitution as a being-under, being-below [*un être-sous, être-dessous*]: not being-under and being-below in the sense of the classical subject, of the *subjectum* or *substantia* or *hypokeimenon*, as what is extended, lying, standing under its predicates, its qualities, attributes or accidents. Rather, as what is put under, submitted [*soumis*], subjected [*assujetti*], under the subjection of the law that is above it, at this height of which Levinas speaks, the height of the Most-High as the height of the other or of God. And this is indeed submission, subjection, sub-jection of one who is who he is only insofar as he asks for the forgiveness of the other: “on one’s knees,” as one says, while entrusting himself [*se livrant*] to the sovereignty of the other who is higher. This verticality of the body and of the asymmetric gaze that gazes at the other without exchanging looks [*sans croiser le regard*], of the face-to-face that does not exchange looks with, nor sees, the face of God—this is the orientation of subjectivity in substitution, which can ask for forgiveness but can never grant itself [*s’accorder*] the assurance of granting [*accorder*] forgiveness. One must [*il faut*] ask for forgiveness

but even if one must [*il faut*] forgive, one must do so without knowing, without having or pretending to have the assurance. "I beg your pardon" is a decent statement—"I forgive you" is an indecent statement because of the haughty and complacent height it denotes or connotes. Who am I, who do I pretend to be to thus grant myself the right to forgive?

If forgiveness can be asked for by me but granted only by the other, then God, the God of mercy, is the name of he who alone can forgive, in the name of whom alone forgiveness can be granted, and who can always abandon me, but also—and this is the equivocal beauty of this word *abandonment*—the only one to whom I can abandon myself, to the forgiveness of whom I can abandon myself.

Thus, I have to ask the *hôte* for forgiveness because, unable to ever receive and give him enough, I always abandon him too much, but inversely, in asking the other for forgiveness and in receiving from him the forgiveness of him, I abandon myself to him.

This is also what one calls love, and, first of all, mystical love, which gives itself without giving anything else but itself; which abandons itself while asking for forgiveness at the height of the other, for forgiveness kneeling, for forgiveness on one's knees, the kneeling of prayer—essential prostration to begged forgiveness—and forgiveness granted from God.

If you read again some of Massignon's letters, you will find—this time in what he calls "the Islamico-Christian front of prayer"—the structure, the inter-subjective, inter-substitutive but dissymmetric scene, and the lexicon of this love-gift, forgiveness, abandonment [*amour-don, pardon, abandon*] in kneeling prostration. I will give a few examples taken from *L'hospitalité sacrée*.

The offering of a soul by another that offers it still. That night, while praying in front of a burning Paschal cierge to gain the ability to love that other soul more than oneself, so that it grows in beauty and in wisdom before God, surpassing in grace the fragile vow, the fraternal clumsiness prostrated in the night. . . . [January 28, 1946]

This grief came to you suddenly, taking [your mother] away from you, she who was the luminous center of your family life. One must kneel in silence before the mysterious divine will who had given her to you—as a deposit—for so many years. . . . [May 31, 1946]

To bring oneself to the divine presence and to invoke it from the bottom of one's heart. To compose a space for the "fiat," kneeling in front of Mary. To consider her trusting humility, her maternal intercession in our poor lives as sinners. To beg her to say for us, for all of us, sinners "*fil badaliya*," this humble, divine word of all vocation: "Fiat." [October 6, 1946]

This is the moment when God's gift [*le don de Dieu*], the Holy Spirit brings us to conceive of abandon with Mary's approval. I have found that I am nothing. I cannot go to Him with my intelligence, I know nothing; nor with my feeling, I feel nothing. I touch him directly with abandon, in an instant, and it is enough. Why ask him for a sign? Why ask to be a martyr? To be burned? Why ask for ecstasy? Abandon is more than ecstasy. It is what already makes us—the becoming that we are—immortal ... (in Arabic: *islam*). [January 4, 1947]

The sword's blow of conversion entirely enlightened me, for a brief moment, with the gaze of my Judge. Silently, coming from his mouth, his liberating word was at least bringing me into the communion of the Church where he had left me alone, searching among his faithful creatures for who would extend to me the adorable and living sign of his mercy—his pierced hand; for who would grant me the consoling word of forgiveness: "I love you." [January 31, 1947]

"To find oneself again [*se retrouver*]": We have learned, haven't we, everything that this poignant word contains of intoxicating immortality to share together. For to love is to find and to find oneself again, it is to enter into solitude, there where faith, hope, and charity become—in our hearts abandoned by all perishable and infinitely poor things—the burning love of the three divine Persons. The three guests of Abraham went to burn Sodom. ... [May 28, 1947]⁴⁹

Besides, if one were to look, in ethics according to Levinas, for the trace of this "forgiveness to be asked for [*ce pardon à demander*]" from the threshold of existence, which is from the first, for every mortal, a surviving [*une survie*], one would find it very early in his texts, as early as *De l'existence à l'existant*, for example (written in captivity between 1940 and 1945). I have not been able to extract all the passages that explicitly name forgiveness but here are a few examples. In *De l'existence à l'existant*, the lexicon of "forgiveness" as originary structure, in a way, surges in an unusual but necessary manner, there were it is a question of freedom and of time. Before speaking, as he already does, of the face-to-face, Levinas redefines freedom in its rapport to time, to the present and to the instant, the limit of freedom: "The freedom of the present finds a limit in the responsibility for which it is the condition."⁵⁰

As soon as the present of freedom at once conditions responsibility and finds itself limited, even negated by it, I am responsible before the other, at the heart of my freedom and even before, if one may say so, being free, in order to be free. Here is

49. Quoted in *L'hospitalité sacrée*, 232–40.

50. Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), 79; [*De l'existence à l'existant* (Paris: Vrin, 1990), 135.

what Levinas precisely calls, already, a paradox: "This is the most profound paradox in the concept of freedom: its synthetic bond with its own negation. A free being alone is responsible, that is, already not free."⁵¹ No doubt one must be free [*sans doute faut-il être libre*] in order to ask for forgiveness and free to grant it. But the paradox of a freedom limited by an originary responsibility before the other is that the relation of the I to the other before whom one is responsible is a rapport of infinite and originary duty and indebtedness, therefore incommensurable, irredeemable [*inacquittable*] and therefore delivered over to the "asking for forgiveness," "asking to be forgiven," saved or redeemed by forgiveness as soon as I say "I" and "I am free" or "responsible." From the most solitary threshold of solitude, I am constituted by this request for forgiveness, this "asking for forgiveness" or by this "being forgiven" for existing, this having to be forgiven—as survivor. Such that the rapport to forgiveness is no longer a secondary, contingent, moment in a kind of chapter of ethics, it is rather constitutive of my being-myself [*mon être-moi-même*] in my rapport with the other. I have to ask for forgiveness for being myself, before asking for forgiveness for what I am, for what I do or what I have. This "forgiveness to be asked for" belongs to a kind of "*cogito*," "*ego cogito*" before the "*ego cogito*": as soon as I say *I*, even in solitude, as soon as I say *ego cogito*, I am in the process of asking for forgiveness or of being forgiven, at least if the experience lasts for more than an instant and temporalizes itself. Such at least is the way I read the following passage, "Solitude is accursed not of itself, but by reason of its ontological significance as something definitive. Reaching the other is not something justified of itself; it is not a matter of shaking me out of my boredom. It is, on the ontological level, the event of the most radical breakup of the very categories of the ego, for it is for me to be somewhere else than my self [already substitution —J. D.]; it is *to be pardoned*, to not be a definite existence. The relationship with the other is not to be conceived as a bond with another ego, nor as a comprehension of the other which makes his alterity disappear, nor as a communion with him around some third term."⁵²

The word *ontological*, it seems to me, here means that everything that is being, like "being forgiven" or "to be forgiven" is a category that is not only psychological or moral, but rather ontological. Yet, this is an event (this is the word: "ontologically the even of the most radical rupture of the very categories of the ego . . .") that, insofar as it is ontological, breaks with traditional ontology and finally, Levinas will say this later, with ontology itself in the name of ethics, metaphysics, or first philosophy.

This thought of forgiveness, from this time on, is therefore a thought of time as the structure of the ego. The "I" temporalizes itself in the leap, the salvation and the

51. Levinas, *Existence*, 79/ *De l'existence*, 135.

52. Levinas, *Existence*, 85/ *De l'existence*, 144; emphasis added.

surviving, the resurrection from one instant to the other. This temporal structure as leap, promised salvation, redemption and resurrection, implies the "forgiveness," or the having to be forgiven, or the having to ask for forgiveness. I will read a passage where this phenomenology of temporalization and of responsible freedom inscribes forgiveness in a thought of salvation, of redemption, of the Messiah and above all of resurrection: resurrection is the miracle of each instant.

The economic world then includes not only our so-called material life, but also all the forms of our existence in which the exigency of salvation [*l'exigence du salut*] has been traded in, in which Esau has already sold his birthright. The world is the secular world, where the "I" accept wages. Religious life itself, when it is understood in terms of the category of wages, is economic. Tools serve this yearning for objects as wages. They have nothing to do with ontology; they are subordinate to desire. They not only suppress disagreeable effort, but also the waiting time. In modern civilization they do not only extend the hand, so that it could get at what it does not get at of itself; they enable it to get at it more quickly, that is, they suppress in an action the time the action has to take on. Tools suppress the intermediary times; they contract duration. Modern tools are machines, that is, systems, arrangements, fittings, coordinations: light fixtures, telephone lines, railroad and highway networks. The multiplicity of organs is the essential characteristic of machines. Machines sum up instants. They produce speed; they echo the impatience of desire.

But this compensating time is not enough for hope. For it is not enough that tears be wiped away or death avenged; no tear is to be lost, no death be without a resurrection. Hope then is not satisfied with a time composed of separate instants given to an ego that traverses them so as to gather in the following instant, as impersonal as the first one, the wages of its pain. The true object of hope is the Messiah, or salvation [*L'objet veritable de l'espoir, c'est le Messie, ou le salut*].

The caress of a consoler which softly comes in our pain does not promise the end of suffering, does not announce any compensation, and in its very contact, is not concerned with what is to come with *afterwards* in economic time; it concerns the very instant of physical pain, which is then no longer condemned to itself, is transported "elsewhere" by the movement of the caress, and is freed from the vice-grip of "one-self," finds "fresh air," a dimension and a future [*avenir*]. Or rather, it announces more than a simple future [*avenir*], a future [*avenir*] where the present will have the benefit of a recall. This effect of compassion, which we in fact all know, is usually posited as an initial datum of psychology, and other things are then explained from it. But in fact it is infinitely mysterious.

Pain cannot be redeemed. Just as the happiness of humanity does not justify the mystery of the individual, retribution in the future [*avenir*] does not wipe away the

pains of the present. There is no justice that could make reparations for it. One should have to return to that instant, or be able to resurrect it. To hope then is to hope for the reparation of the irreparable; it is to hope for the present. It is generally thought that this reparation is impossible in time, and that eternity alone, where instants distinct in time are indiscernible, is the locus of salvation [*le lieu du salut*]. This recourse to eternity, which does not seem to us indispensable, does at any rate bear witness to the impossible exigency for salvation which must concern the very instant of pain, and not only compensate for it. Does not the essence of time consist in responding to that exigency for salvation? Does not the analysis of economic time, exterior to the subject, cover over the essential structure of time by which the present is not only indemnified, but resurrected? Is not the future [*avenir*] above all a resurrection of the present [*une resurrection du présent*]?

Time and the "I"

We believe that time is just that. What is called the "next instant" is an annulment of the unimpeachable commitment to existence made in the instant; it is the resurrection of the "I." We believe that the "I" does not enter identical and unforgiven [*identique et impardonné*]—a mere avatar—into the following instant, where it would undergo a new experience whose newness will not free it from its bond with itself—but that its death in the empty interval will have been the condition for a new birth. The "elsewhere which opens up to it will not only be a "change from its homeland" [*un "dépaysement"*] but an "elsewhere than in itself [*"ailleurs qu'en soi"*], which does not mean that it sank into the impersonal or the eternal. Time is not a succession of instants filing by before an I, but the response to the hope for the present, which in the present is the very expression of the "I," and is itself equivalent to the present. All the acuteness of hope in the midst of despair comes from the exigency that the very instant of despair be redeemed. To understand the mystery of the work of time, we should start with the hope for the present, taken as a primary fact. Hope hopes for the present itself. Its martyrdom does not slip into the past, leaving us with a right to wages. At the very moment where all is lost, everything is possible.

There then is no question of denying the time of our concrete existence, constituted by a series of instants to which the "I" remains exterior. For such is the time of economic life, where the instants are equivalent, and the "I" circulates across them to link them up. There time is the renewal of the subject, but this renewal does not banish tedium; it does not free the ego from its shadow. We ask then whether the event of time cannot be lived more deeply as the resurrection of the irreplaceable instant [*l'irremplaçable instant*]. In place of the "I" that circulates in time, we posit the "I" as the very ferment of time in the present, the dynamism of time. This dynamism is not that of dialectical progression, nor that of ecstasy, nor that of duration, where the present

encroaches upon the future [*avenir*] and consequently does not have between its being and its resurrection the indispensable interval of nothingness. The dynamism of the "I" resides in the very presence of the present, in the exigency which this presence implies. This exigency does not concern perseverance in being, nor, properly speaking, the impossible destruction of this presence, but the unraveling of the knot which is tied in it, the definitive, which its evanescence does not undo. It is an exigency for a recommencement of being, and a hope in each recommencement of its non-definitiveness. The "I" is not a being that, as a residue of a past instant, attempts a new instant. It is this exigency for the non-definitive. *The "personality" of a being is its very need for time* as a miraculous fecundity in the instant itself, by which it recommences as other.

But it cannot endow itself with this alterity. The impossibility of constituting time dialectically is the impossibility of saving oneself by oneself and of saving oneself alone [*l'impossibilité de se sauver par soi-même et de se sauver tout seul*]. The "I" is not independent of its present, cannot traverse time alone, and does not find its recompense in simply denying the present. In situating what is tragic in the human in the definitiveness of the present, and in positing the function of the I as something inseparable from this tragic structure, we recognize that we are not going to find in the subject the means for its salvation. It can only come from elsewhere, while everything in the subject is here.⁵³

Forgiveness is therefore inscribed in the becoming-responsibility of freedom—that is to say, in the very movement of temporalization as well. Here is what all classical philosophy of time, until Bergson and Heidegger, will have missed. They have missed forgiveness, all these philosophers of time; in sum, they have not thought forgiveness. And thereby [*et du coup*], they have missed time, they have lacked the time to think time, which thinks only from [*depuis*] forgiveness. It is their fault, the ontological fault of ontology. Levinas does not say that it is an unforgivable fault, but one can say it while smiling in his place [*mais on peut le dire en souriant à sa place*]:

Traditional philosophy, and Bergson and Heidegger too, remained with the conception of a time either taken to be purely exterior to the subject, a time-object, or taken to be entirely contained in the subject. But the subject in question was always a solitary subject. The ego all alone, the monad, already had a time. The renewal which time brings with it seemed to classical philosophy to be an event which it could account for by the monad, an event of negation. It is from the indetermination of nothingness, which the instant which negates itself at the approach of the new instant ends up in, that the subject was taken to draw its freedom. Classical philosophy left

53. Levinas, *Existence*, 90–93/ *De l'existence*, 155–59.

aside the freedom which consists in not negating oneself, but in having one's being *pardoned* by the very alterity of the other. It underestimated the alterity of the other in dialogue where the other frees us, because it believed there existed a silent dialogue of the soul with itself. In the end the problem of time is subordinate to the task of bringing out the specific terms with which dialogue has to be conceived.⁵⁴

One will find these motifs, somehow transformed, but faithfully so, a long time later, at least in *Totalité et infini*, precisely in the passages devoted to "The Ethical Relation and Time."⁵⁵ Here, in a gripping manner, it is at the heart of the analysis of betrayal, of an essential betrayal, linked to essence and to the possibility of the will, that the figure of forgiveness appears as an essential figure of history, of what does and undoes history.

This is the paradox and the essence of time itself proceeding unto death, where the will is affected as a thing by the things—by the point of steel or by the chemistry of the tissues (due to a murderer or to the impotency of the doctors)—but gives itself a reprieve and postpones the contact by the against-death of postponement. The will essentially violable harbors treason in its own essence. It is not only offendable in its dignity—which would confirm its inviolable character—but is susceptible of being coerced and enslaved as a will, becoming a servile soul. (...) And yet in its separation from the work and in the possible betrayal that threatens it in the course of its very exercise, the will becomes aware of this betrayal and thereby keeps itself at a distance from it. Thus, faithful to itself, it remains in a certain sense inviolable, escapes its own history, and renews itself. There is no inward history. The inwardness of the will posits itself subject to a jurisdiction which scrutinizes its intentions, before which the meaning of its being coincides totally with its inward will. The volitions of the will do not weigh on it, and from the jurisdiction to which it opens comes pardon, the power to efface, to absolve, to undo history. The will thus moves between its betrayal and its fidelity which, simultaneous, describes the very originality of its power. But the fidelity does not forget the betrayal . . . and the pardon which ensures [the will] this fidelity comes to it from the outside. Hence the rights of the inward will, its certitude of being a misunderstood will, still reveal a relation with exteriority. The will awaits its investiture and pardon. It awaits them from an exterior will, but one from which it would experience no longer shock but judgment, an exteriority withdrawn from the antagonism of wills, withdrawn from history. This possibility of justification and

54. Levinas, *Existence*, 95/*De l'existence*, 160–61; *Translator's Note*: Levinas's emphasis is not reproduced in Lingis' English translation.

55. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 220ff; *Totalité et infini* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), 195ff.

pardon, as religious consciousness in which interiority tends to coincide with being, opens before the Other, to whom I can speak. I speak a word that, in the measure that it welcomes the Other as Other, offers or sacrifices to him a product of labor, and consequently does not play above economy. Thus we see expression, the other extremity of the voluntary power that is separated from its work and betrayed by it, nonetheless referring to the inexpressive work by which the will, free with regard to history, partakes of history.⁵⁶

This inscription, so necessary, of forgiveness in betrayal and of betrayal in forgiveness, is what enables saying to the other or of hearing oneself tell the other and hearing the other tell oneself [*s'entendre dire par l'autre*, hearing oneself told by the other] and hearing, understanding what is thus said: you see, you start again, you don't want to forgive me, even on the day of Atonement, but me too, me neither, a "me" neither, we are in accord, we will forgive each other nothing, it is impossible, let us not forgive each other, agreed [*d'accord*]? And then comes the complicitous burst of laughter, the mad laughter, laughter becoming mad, demented laughter [*le rire dément*].

Le rire dément, demented laughter, laughter denies. Yes, laughter denies. It is mad, this demented laughter, and it denies lying [*et il dément mentir*]. This laughter is, like every laughter, a kind of denegation of lying which lies still while denying lying or while avowing lying—or, if you prefer, which says the truth of lying, which says the truth in lying, thus recognizing that a logic of the symptom will always be stronger than an ethic of truthfulness [*véracité*]. Whatever I would want to say, sincerely or not, this will mean [*cela voudra dire*] or rather this will signify without *vouloir-dire* more and something else than what I want to say, through my body, my history, the economy of my existence, of my life or of my relation to death. And here is another lie to be forgiven.

These two Jews are also just and righteous, in their own manner, righteous ones who are just enough [*des justes assez justes*] to avow, to avow to the other and avow to the other in themselves that they are incapable of forgiving, that they are not just enough, not even sincere enough, since they continue to lie at the moment of avowal. The extreme vigilance is always at fault—this is why forgiveness is always to be asked for and why it always leaves something to be desired, why, besides, it belongs from the beginning to the scene of desire, to the disproportion of desire and of love: I love you, forgive me, *pardon*, I love you. Forgive me for loving you, forgive me for loving you too much, that is say, not enough, for loving you as the

56. Levinas, *Totality*, 229–32/*Totalité*, 205–208.

other, for loving the other in you, of missing you, failing to reach you [*de te manquer*, also: for your missing me] always, etc.

And yet, the avowal, even the reciprocal and almost simultaneous avowal of the common and mutual fault (as in the Jewish story), deserves compassion, we said, and a kind of forgiveness granted by one knows not who, a forgiveness which takes place even there where nobody can forgive anyone [*là où personne ne peut pardonner à personne*], the granting of a granted forgiveness [*l'accord d'un pardon accordé*] by an X, a great Third, God, if you will, that renders substitution possible. For it is not by chance, nor contingent, nor avoidable, that it would be always and finally of God that we ask for forgiveness, even when we are linked by a scene of forgiveness, to one or the other [*à tel ou tel*] on earth, as we recalled last time when evoking "Our Father who art in Heaven":

Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we have also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.⁵⁷

This paradoxical agreement in the compassion that I imagine or dream between the two Jews in the synagogue—is it not peace? Yes, it is peace, it is life: at bottom, this is the great forgiveness [*le grand pardon*], if there is one, but on a day of great forgiveness, one must always say "the great forgiveness, if there is one"—to the grace of God. And what is more comical than the great forgiveness as test and ordeal of the unforgivable? What is more alive, what better reconciliation? What an art of living! How to do otherwise, besides, what better to do, as soon as one lives or survives? Without having chosen? This is the definition of today [*c'est la définition d'aujourd'hui*], of a today, a *sursis de vie*, this reconciliation in the impossible.

But I want to suppose that these two Jews, in their infinite compassion for each other, at the very moment when they decide that they do not know how to stop [*au moment même où ils arrêtent qu'ils ne savent pas s'arrêter*], at the very moment when they recognize that they cannot disarm nor stop [*désarmer*], as life itself never disarms nor stops [*ne se désarme jamais*], these two Jews will have forgiven each other, but without saying so to each other. They have at least spoken to each other, even if they have not spoken forgiveness. They have told each other—in silence, a silence of innuendo [*sous-entendu*] where misunderstanding [*le malentendu*] can always find space to reside—that forgiveness granted does not signify

57. *Translator's Note*: Matthew 6:9–13; Derrida emphasizes "as [*comme*]."

"reconciliation" (Hegel) nor "work itself," "the deep work of time" discontinuous, delivered and delivering of continuity by the interruption of the other, in view of the "messianic triumph" "forewarned against the revenge of evil" (Levinas).

For here is the last aporia of forgiveness, the most artful perhaps, the most gifted to provoke laughter to the point of madness.

On the one hand, when someone forgives someone else (for example, the worst possible wound, or, still more simply, what may repeat it even perversely, the recall of a wound), well then, one must above all not tell the latter. The other must not hear [*il ne faut pas que l'autre entende*], one must not say, that one forgives, not only in order not to recall the (double) fault but also not to recall or to manifest that something was given (forgiven, given as forgiveness), something was given back again, that deserves some gratitude or risks obligating the one who is forgiven. At bottom, nothing is more vulgar and impolite, even wounding, than to obligate someone by telling them "I forgive you," which implies an "I give you" and already opens a scene of acknowledgment [*reconnaissance*], a transaction of gratitude, a commerce of thanking that destroys the gift. Similarly, one must never say: "I grant you hospitality" or "I invite you." When one says "I invite you," it means: I pay and we are inscribed in the circular commerce of the most inhospitable exchange possible, the least giving. When one invites, not only mustn't one send invitation cards and say "I invite you," it is me who invites. Not only must one not say this, but one must also not think it nor believe it, nor make it appear—to oneself or to the other. One must therefore say nothing [*il faut donc se taire*], one must say nothing of forgiveness [*il faut taire le pardon*] where it takes place, if it takes place. This silence, this inaudibility that calls itself, that is allowed by, death. As if one could forgive only the dead (acting, at least, as if the other were dead ("for laughs"), as if he were in a situation of no longer being here ever to hear, at the moment of receiving forgiveness), and as if one could forgive only the dead while playing dead oneself [*tout en faisant soi-même le mort*] (as if one were not forgiving, as if one were not letting the other know or, at the limit, as if one did not even know oneself). From this point of view, two living beings cannot forgive each other nor declare to each other that they forgive each other insofar as they are living. One would have to be dead to believe that forgiveness is possible. The two Jews had the depth, the rigor, and the honesty of noticing that, better, of declaring it.

But, *on the other hand*, and inversely, what would a silent forgiveness be, an unperceived forgiveness, an unknown forgiveness, granted unbeknownst to the one receiving it? What would be a forgiveness of which the forgiven one would know nothing? It would no longer be forgiveness. Such silence, in forgiveness, would be as disastrous [*néfaste*] as what silence would have wanted to avoid. A forgiveness that would address itself only to the other dead (once dead, and even if his specter sur-

vives "in me"), wouldn't that be a gesticulation of comedy, a miserable simulacrum, at most a phantasm destined to console oneself for not having known how to forgive on time? A reconciliation with oneself with which the other has nothing to do? If there were to be forgiveness, I would therefore have to forgive when it is still time, *before* the death of the other. And of course *before* my death: what would forgiveness be that would come from the dead? It is true that this forgiveness from dead to dead, from one bank of death to the other, is, in fact, the most common recourse—our life is made of it—a spectral and phantasmatic recourse, a forgiveness of *procedure*, a historical forgiveness there where forgiveness must remain irreducible to history, a forgiveness that loses itself in oblivion and denatures itself in excuse and veniality, as soon as from living to living, true forgiveness, forgiveness of the unforgivable, remains forbidden. *A priori*, and thus *forever* forbidden.

What, then? Do precisely what is *always* forbidden, forbidden *forever*? Forgive, there where it is forbidden, there where it is possible *because* impossible? And worse yet, do what is forbidden on a day of great forgiveness [*un jour de Grand Pardon*]? There is no worse sin, more dangerous profanation, so close to the moment when God inscribes you—or does not—in the book of the living.

Let us summarize the properly scandalous aporia, the one upon which we cannot but stop while falling upon it: impossible, possible only *insofar as* impossible, impossible concept of the impossible which would start to resemble a *flatus vocis* if it were not what one desires the most in the world, as impossible as the forgiveness of the unforgivable—forgiveness remains, impossible, in any case [*de toutes les façons*]: between two living, between the dead and the living, between the living and the dead, between two dead. It is only possible, in its very impossibility, at the invisible border between life and death (for one has seen, one can forgive only there where the forgiven and the forgiving are not there to know it) but this border of scandal does not let itself be crossed: neither by the living nor by the dead [*ni par du vivant ni par du mort*].

It is not even crossed, though there lies perhaps the undiscoverable site which all these questions watch [*veillent*], by the specter [*par du spectre*]. At what moment does Abraham waken the memory of his being foreign abroad, to the stranger [*son être-étranger à l'étranger*]? For Abraham calls himself again, he recalls that he is destined by God to be a *hôte* (*ger*), an immigrant, a foreign body abroad, a strange body to the stranger [*un corps étranger à l'étranger*] ("Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house. . . . your offspring shall be *hôtes* in a land that is not theirs. . . ." [Genesis 12:1, 15:13]).

Presenting himself thus as a stranger without a home, watching [*veillant*] the body of his dead Sarah (the woman who laughs at the announcement of a birth while pretending that she didn't laugh), Abraham asks for a site for her. A last

demeure. He wants to be able to give her a burial worthy of her, but also a site that would separate him from her, like death from life, a site “facing me,” says one translation, “out of my sight,” says another (Genesis 22:4). And for this, one knows the scene; he wants to pay, the husband of Sarah, the woman who laughs, he insists firmly, he does not want that this be given to him, under any condition, not at any price [*à aucun prix*]. Besides, Abraham too had laughed, at the announcement of the same news, the late birth of Isaac (*Yiṣḥaq*: he laughed. Isaac, the coming of Isaac, causes both of them to shake with laughter, one after the other; Isaac is the name of he who *comes* to make them laugh, laugh at his coming, at his very coming, as if laughter had to greet a birth, the coming of a happy event, a coming [of, from, to (*du*)] laughter: come-laugh-with-me). The moment came to laugh—this was also the moment Elohim named Sarah. He gave her a name [*il la surnomma*], deciding rather that Abraham, who just received an other name (changed from Abram to Abraham), would no longer call her Sarai, my princess, but Sarah, princess.

To this question in the form of an aporia, I know no appeasing answer. Not even mad laughter. Nothing is given in advance for forgiveness, no rule, no criteria, no norm. It is the chaos at the origin of the world. The abyss of this non-response, such would be the condition of responsibility—decision and forgiveness, the decision to forgive this concept, if there ever is one. And always in the name of the other.

(Last vertigo, last breath: forgiving in the name of the other: is this only forgiving in one's/his place [*à sa place*], for the other, in substitution? Or is it forgiving the other one's/his name, that is to say what survives of him, forgiving [in] the name of the other [*pardonne au nom de l'autre*] as [to] his first fault?)

The answer must be each time invented, singular, signed—and each time once only [*et chaque fois une seule fois*] like the gift of a work, a donation of art and of life, unique and replayed until the end of the world [*et jusqu'à la fin du monde rejouée*].

Given and dealt again [*redonnée*]. To the impossible, I want to say unto the impossible.

If one wanted systematically to pursue a search about forgiveness in Levinas, and from the point of view of hospitality, it is to the theme of cities of refuge [Deuteronomy 19] that one would have to return.⁵⁸ These cities are not sites where one forgives the involuntary murderer who is welcomed. Rather, one grants him respite, an excuse, a relative and temporary absolution. I do not want to go over this again here, we have read the texts closely enough. I would have been tempted, however, to insist on the fact that, in Levinas' eyes—and this is why, though he lauds

58. *Translator's Note*: See Emmanuel Levinas, “Cities of Refuge,” in *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans. Gary Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 34–52; “Les villes-refuges” in *L'au-delà du verset: Lectures et cours talmudiques* (Paris: Minuit, 1982).

those cities, he still finds the law equivocal—there is no innocent murder, and one is guilty even of murders committed by accident (you remember), which would mean that any murder, any transgression of the “thou shall not kill” is unforgivable (war? State of David? Messianic peace? And animal sacrifice . . . ?)

I just recalled the word *ger* (stranger, *hôte*) which names in Abraham or Ibrahim he who is destined by God to be a *hôte* (*ger*), an immigrant, a foreign body abroad. But it seems that in Arabic, and in the Islamic world (I say “it seems,” and I speak only very indirectly because my competence in Arabic is no less than my competence in Hebrew, and I move forward here, prudently, only under the control of those who know and will correct me or will help me on occasion), it seems, I say, that one could make the link between *ger* and the names *giwār* and *dakhīl*. *Giwār*, noun of action, means both protection and neighborliness, protection of him who is *gār*, protected, customer, substantive that is often linked to the Hebrew usage of *ger* (protected by the tribe and the community). An expert on Semitic languages, Theodor Nöldeke, asserts that the two words are used in the “same juridical sense (*im wesentlich demselben rechtlichen Sinne*: in a legal, juridical sense that is essentially the same).”⁵⁹ The two words also share a connotation of holiness when they are both invoked, it seems, to refer to the protection of a holy site or to what is protected by a holy site or by a deity. I have learned also that the Phoenician cognate of these two words, appearing in many proper names, designates whoever is protected by the holiness of a site, by sacred hospitality, in sum: Charles Viroilleaud, eminent expert and pioneer in the study of *Ras sarma*, writes the following: “*Gr* already appears in the fourteenth century B.C.E. in a poem where one reads *gr bt il*, which I have translated in 1936 in my *La légende de Danel*, ‘the *hôte* of the house of God.’ . . . Cyrus H. Gordon rendered this as ‘a person taking asylum in a temple.’” What is clear, in any case, is that the *hôte* or stranger is holy, divine, protected by divine blessing.

A last remark to conclude for today. It does seem that the meaning of “protected” privileged by Nöldeke, without putting into question the origin and the socioreligious value of the term, underscores its conservation as a phenomenon of the nomadic tradition, of the nomadic customary law. This would also be the case for *dakhīl* (interior, intimate, *hôte* to whom protection is due, stranger, passing traveler. The right of the *dakhīl* would be a right of asylum witnessed everywhere in the Semitic world). However, although some Arab lexicographers see here a derivation of the meaning “to pause at the place of a *hôte*” from the prior sense of “deviate,” it may still be about, and here I quote from the *Encyclopædia of Islam*, “the almost universal semantic link between ‘stranger, enemy’ (cf. Latin *hostis*) and ‘*hôte*,

59. Theodor Nöldeke, *Neue Beiträge zur Semitischen Sprachwissenschaft* (Strassburg: K. J. Trubner, 1910), 38.

customer," since the root *gwr* has in both languages also the sense of hostility, injustice. Gesenius suggests the link to Akkadian *geru*, but it is rather *gār*, enemy, that would be appropriate."

We are back, then, as nomadic as sedentary, to the sites of our *hostipitality*. We will depart again in order to err again, going from substitution to substitution: "substitution frees the subject from boredom [*la substitution affranchit le sujet de l'ennui*]" says Levinas.⁶⁰ Let us hope.

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In the indirect and diverted trace of a motif from the Arabo-Islamic culture of hospitality, we were in the process of attending to the double motif of pervertibility and deviation, of swerving off the road, the migratory errancy of the foreign errant [*l'errant étranger*] who makes a halt and who has the right to hospitality for three days. Between the two motifs, let us first note this, between the pervertibility of an hospitality that can both poison the *hôte* and therefore also poison itself, corrupt itself, pervert itself, between deviation, digression (from oneself) and corruptibility, there is an obvious and unavoidable passage. It is inscribed in the very meaning [*valeur*] of stranger, foreign, or foreigner [*étranger*], that is to say what is foreign to the proper, foreign to and not proper to, not close to or proximate to [*non proche à*]. The stranger is a digression that risks corrupting the proximity to self of the proper.

Mais que veut dire l'étranger? But what does the stranger mean? What does the foreigner want to say? What does he mean, and does he want to speak, the stranger? What impression does the usage of this worn word [*l'usage de ce mot usé*] leave behind? Do the logic and rhetoric which make use of this worn word have a sense, one sense and a pure one [*un sens un et pur*], which does not pervert itself nor contaminate itself immediately?⁶¹

We are still facing the question of the stranger, that which comes to us from the stranger, there where he interrogates us first, even puts us into question, and the question of what the stranger wants to say/mean [*et celle de ce que veut dire "l'étranger"*].

Que veut dire l'étranger?

60. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 124; *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 160.

61. *Translator's Note*: At this point in the lecture, Derrida recommends Sophie Wahnich, *L'impossible citoyen, L'étranger dans le discours de la Révolution française* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997). On the difficulties of reading "la question de l'étranger" see Anne Dufourmantelle and Jacques Derrida, *On Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

Here the temptation emerges of going back on the tracks of seminars from ten years ago (Georg Trakl, and *Unterwegs zur Sprache (La parole dans le poème, Die Sprache im Gedicht: Est ist die Seele ein Fremdes auf Erden, the soul is, in truth, a foreigner on the earth . . . the step of the stranger resonates through the silver night, und es läutet der Schritt / Des Fremdlings durch die silberne Nacht)*).

One would have to go over—this time by letting ourselves be guided by our meditation on hospitality—all that we tried to think in an earlier lecture about the difference between the stranger and the others, the blow [*Schlag, la frappe*] of *Geschlecht* as human species and as sex, sexual difference, the rapport between brother and sister.⁶² We wouldn't have time, and I don't have the courage. Were we to do it, however, and I do invite you to try for yourselves, one would perhaps have to read with one hand Heidegger and Trakl (and I believe there is already more than one hand) and with the other a text by Levinas entitled "The Foreignness to Being," which says something of the reference to Trakl⁶³:

Let us finally venture to raise some questions with regard to Heidegger. Is man's foreignness in the world [*l'étrangeté de l'homme au monde*] the effect of a process that began with the Presocratics, who spoke of the openness of being without preventing the forgetting of this openness in Plato, Aristotle, and Descartes? The soul exiled here below, which Plato transmits to metaphysical thought, already attests to the forgetting of being. But does the notion of the subject reflect only what Heidegger calls the history of being, whose metaphysical forgetting marks the epoch of the history of philosophy? Does the crisis of inwardness mark the end of this foreignness, exception or exile, of the subject and of man? Is it for stateless man the return to a fatherland on the earth [*est-ce pour l'homme apatrié le retour à une patrie sur terre*]?

Are not we Westerners, from California to the Urals, nourished by the Bible as much as by the Presocratics, foreigners in the world [*étrangers au monde*], but in a way that owes nothing to the certainty of the *cogito*, which, since Descartes, is said to express the being of entities? The end of metaphysics does not succeed in dissipating this foreignness to the world. Are we standing before non-sense infiltrating into a world in which hitherto man was not only the shepherd of being, but elected for himself? Or shall the strange defeat or defection of identity confirm the human election—my own, to serve, but that of the other for himself? The verses of the Bible do not here

62. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit*, trans. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). *Translator's Note*: On Heidegger, Trakl, *Schlag* and *Geschlecht*, see Jacques Derrida, "Geschlecht II: Heidegger's Hand," trans. John P. Leavey Jr. in *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*, ed. John Sallis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), esp. 185ff.

63. Emmanuel Levinas, "No Identity," trans. Alphonso Lingis, in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), esp. 148.