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RELIGION AND POSTMODERNISM
A series edited by Mark C. Taylor and Thomas A. Carlson

RECENT BOOKS IN THE SERIES

THE GIFT
OF DEATH
SECOND EDITION
&
LITERATURE
IN SECRET

JACQUES DERRIDA

TRANSLATED BY
DAVID WILLS

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
CHICAGO AND LONDON
to marry (bei meiner Heiratsunfähigkeit). . . . The most important obstacle to marriage, however, is the no longer eradicable conviction that what is essential to the support of a family and especially to its guidance, is what I have recognized in you; and indeed everything rolled into one, good and bad, as it is organically combined in you. . . . And now marry without going mad! (Und jetzt heirate, ohne wahnsinnig zu werden!) . . .

If you look at the reasons I offer for the fear I have of you, you might answer (Du kannst . . . antworten): . . . you too repudiate all guilt and responsibility (Zuerst lehnst auch Du jede Schuld und Verantwortung von dir ab); in this our methods are the same [Kafka thus has his father say that they both act by mirroring each other, doing the same thing]. But whereas I then attribute the sole guilt to you as frankly as I mean it, you want to be “overly clever” and “overly affectionate” (“übergescheit” und “überzartlich”) at the same time and acquit me also of all guilt (mich von jeder Schuld freisprechen). Of course in the latter you only seem to succeed (and more you do not even want), and what appears between the lines, in spite of all the “turns of phrase” [your ways of speaking, your turns of phrase, your rhetoric, Redensarten] about character and nature and antagonism and helplessness, is that actually I have been the aggressor, while everything you were up to was self-defense. By now you would have achieved enough by your very insincerity (Unaufrichtigkeit), for you have proved three things (Du hast dreierlei bewiesen): first, that you are not guilty; second, that I am the guilty one; and third, that out of sheer magnanimity you are ready not only to forgive me (bereit bist, nicht nur mir zu verzeihen), but (what is both more and less) also to prove and be willing to believe yourself that—contrary to the truth—I am also not guilty.\footnote{3. Franz Kafka, “Letter to His Father,” in The Sons, trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins, rev. Arthur S. Wensinger (New York: Schocken, 1989), 162–66.}

Such an extraordinary speculation, such bottomless specularity. The son is speaking to himself. He speaks to himself in the name of his father. Taking his place and borrowing his voice, imputing certain words to him while at the same time ceding him the floor, he has his father say: you take me for the aggressor but I am innocent, you assume sovereignty by forgiving me, hence by asking yourself for forgiveness in my stead [place], then by granting me forgiveness and, by so doing, you score a double blow, the triple blow of accusing me, forgiving me, and exculpating me, so as to finish by believing me innocent at the very point where you had done all you could to accuse me, demanding as a surplus my innocence, which is yours since you identify with me. But this is what the father reminds him, in fact the law of the father that speaks through the mouth of the son speaking through the mouth of the father: if one cannot forgive without identifying with the guilty, neither can one forgive and render innocent at the same time. Forgiving means bestowing on the evil that one absolves the status of an unforgettable and unforgivable evil. By virtue of the same specular identification one cannot therefore exculpate by forgiving. One doesn’t forgive someone who is innocent. If by forgiving one renders innocent, one is also guilty of forgiving. Forgiveness granted is as faulty as forgiveness requested; it admits the fault. Given that, one cannot forgive without being guilty and therefore without having to ask forgiveness for forgiving. “Forgive me for forgiving you” is a sentence that must be heard in every case of forgiveness, and in the first place because it guiltily assumes a certain sovereignty. But neither does it seem possible to silence the converse sentence: “Forgive me for asking forgiveness of you, which is to say in the first place for requiring you, by means of the identification that I am asking for, to bear my guilt, and the burden of the fault of having to forgive me.” One of the causes of this aporia of forgiveness is the fact that one cannot forgive, ask, or grant forgiveness without this specular identification, without speaking in the other’s stead and with the other’s voice. Forgiving by means of this specular identification is not forgiving, because it doesn’t mean forgiving the other as such for an evil as such.

We shall refrain from commenting on the end of this letter to the son, the fictive moment of an equally fictive Letter to My Father.
Literature in Secret

But it carries in its depths, perhaps, what is essential in this secret passage between secrecy and literature as an aporia of forgiveness. The accusation that the fictive father will never withdraw, the grievance that he never makes either symmetrical or specular (through the fictive voice of the son according to this legal fiction which, like paternity for Joyce, literature constitutes), is the accusation of parasitism. It runs throughout the letter, throughout the fiction and the fiction within the fiction. In the end it is literary writing itself that the father accuses of parasitism. Parasitism is the whole cause to which the son has devoted his life, everything to which he admits having unforgivably devoted his life. He has committed the error of writing instead of working; he has been content to write instead of marrying normally. In the name of the father, in the name of the father and of the son speaking to himself in the name of the father, in the name of the son denouncing himself in the name of the father, but without the holy spirit (unless Literature were to be playing at the 'Trinity here), everything here accuses parasitism and everything accuses itself of parasitism. The son is a parasite, as literature. For the accused, of whom it is now asked to ask for forgiveness, is literature. Literature is accused of parasitism and is begged to ask for forgiveness by owning up to this parasitism, by repenting of this sin of parasitism. That is true even of the fictive letter within the fictive letter. The latter therefore sees itself taken to court by the voice of the father inasmuch as that voice finds itself lent, borrowed, or parasited, written by the son: "If I am not very much mistaken," says the son-father, the father with the son's voice or the son with the father's voice, "you are preying on me [vivre en parasite sur moi] even with this letter itself (Wenn ich nicht sehr irre, schmarotzet Du an mir auch noch mit diesem Brief als solchem)" (167).

The father's indictment (spoken to the son through the voice of the son who speaks through the voice of the father) had previously developed this argument concerning parasitism and vampirism at some length. Distinguishing between chivalrous combat and that of the parasitic vermin (den Kampf des Ungeziefers) that sucks the blood of others, the father's voice is raised against a son who is not only "unfit for life" (Lebensunfähigkeit) but also indifferent to this lack of fitness, insensitive to his heteronomic dependency, caring little for

Father, Son, and Literature

autonomy since he transfers responsibility (Verantwortung) for it to his father. "Be autonomous at least!" the intractable father seems to command. An example of this is the impossible marriage that is the subject of the letter: the son doesn't want to marry, but he accuses the father of forbidding him to marry "because of the disgrace (Schande) this union would bring upon my name" (ibid.)—so says the father via the son's pen. It is therefore in the name of the name of the father—a name that is paralyzed, parasited, vampirized by what the son produces that almost amounts to literature—that this incredible scene gets written: as impossible scene of impossible forgiveness. Of and for an impossible marriage. But the secret of this letter, as we have suggested elsewhere concerning Paul Celan's 'Todtnauberg,' is that the impossible—impossible forgiveness, im-possible covenant or marriage—has perhaps taken place as this very letter, by means of the poetic madness of this event called Letter to My Father.

Literature will have been meteoric. Like secrecy. A meteor is called a phaenomenon, such as appears in the brilliance or phaines-thai of light, produced in the atmosphere. Like a type of rainbow. (I've never believed too much in what the rainbow is said to mean, but neither could I be insensitive, less than three days ago, to the rainbow that arched over the Tel Aviv airport as I was returning, first from Palestine, then again from Jerusalem, a few moments before—in an absolutely exceptional way, as never happens to such an extent—that city was buried under an almost diluvian snowfall, cutting it off from the rest of the world.) The meteorite's secret is that it becomes luminous upon, as one says, entering the earth's atmosphere, arriving from who knows where, but in any case from another body from which it has become detached. Then, what is meteoric must be brief, rapid, transitory. Furtive in its lightning passage, that is to say perhaps as clandestine and guilty as a thief. As brief as our still suspended phrase ("Pardon for not meaning [to say] . . ."). A question of time. At the outside of an instant.

The life of a meteorite will have always been too short: the time of lighting, of a thunderclap, of a rainbow. Lightning, thunder, and the rainbow are defined as meteors. Rain also. It is easy to think of God, even the God of Abraham, speaking to us meteorically. He comes down upon us vertically, like rain, like a meteor. Unless it be that he descends by suspending his descent, by interrupting its movement. For example by saying to us “Pardon for not meaning (to say) . . .” Not that God himself says that, or retracts in that way, but that is perhaps what the “name of God” means to us.

A fabled reader finds himself represented here. He is at work. He thus seeks to decipher the sense of this phrase, the origin and destination of this message that carries nothing. This message is secret for the moment, but it does also say that a secret will be kept. And an infinite reader, the reader of infinity whom I see at work, is wondering whether this secret concerning secrecy is not avowing something like literature itself.

But why then speak here of avowals and forgiveness? Why would literature have to be avowed? avowed for what it doesn’t show? itself? Why forgiveness? Why would forgiveness, even a fictive forgiveness, be asked for here? For there is this word pardon in the meteorite “Pardon for not meaning (to say).” And what would forgiveness have to do with the double-bottomed secret of literature?

One would be wrong to think that forgiveness, presuming already that it functions vertically, is always requested from the bottom up, or is always granted top down. From most high down to earth. The fact that scenes of public repentance and pleas for forgiveness abound today, sometimes seeming to innovate in descending from the summits of the state, from the head or chief of state, sometimes also from the highest authorities of church, country, or nation state (France, Poland, Germany, not yet the Vatican), is not without precedent, even if in the past it was extremely rare. There was, for example, the act of repentance by the Emperor Theodosius the Great (ordered by Saint Ambrose).5 More than once God himself seems to repent, to express regret or remorse. He seems to change his mind, to reproach himself for acting badly, to retract and undertake not to do it over again. And his gesture at least resembles a plea for forgiveness, a confession, an attempt at reconciliation. Restricting ourselves to this single example among others, didn’t Yahweh go back on his error after the flood? Didn’t he take it back? Didn’t he repent, as though asking for forgiveness, in fact regretting the evil of a curse that he had pronounced, once he was faced with the sacrificial holocaust offered by Noah, and smelled the sweet and appeasing savor of the animal victims wafting up toward him; didn’t he renounce the evil he had committed and the curse preceding that? Indeed, he writes,

I will not again curse the ground any more for man’s sake; for the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done.

While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease. (Genesis 8:21–22)

In the Chouraqui translation the word “curse” [malédiction], in its verb form maudire, is to be underlined even more, for it will shortly be contrasted with a blessing [bénédiction].6 Follow God, see what he does, what he says. After confessing to a past curse, one he undertakes never to repeat, after having, in short, asked secretly for forgiveness, in his heart of hearts, as though he were speaking to himself, Jahweh is going to pronounce a benediction. The benediction will be a promise, hence the sworn pledge of a covenant. A covenant not with humans only, but with all animals, every living thing, a promise that we forget today every time that an animal is killed or maltreated. We should continue to meditate upon the


6. “Je n’ajouterai pas à maudire encore la glèbe à cause du glébeux [Adam]: Oui, la formation du cœur du glébeux est un mal dès sa jeunesse. Je n’ajouterai pas encore à frapper tout vivant, comme je l’ai fait. Tous les jours de la terre encore, semence et moisson, froideur et chaleur, été et hiver, jour et nuit ne chômeront pas.”
fact that the promise or pledge of this covenant took the form of a
rainbow, which is to say of a meteorite, we should meditate on that
while still following the traces of the secret, as well as what binds
the experience of secrecy to that of the meteor.

God undertakes therefore to do no more what he has done.
What he has done will have been the evil of a misdeed, an evil never
to be repeated, and so having to be forgiven, even if by himself. But
can one ever forgive oneself?

An immense question. For if God were to ask for forgiveness,
of whom would he ask it? Who can forgive him for something, a
misdeed (the question of “what”)? or forgive it, itself (the question
of “who”), the fact of having sinned: Who could forgive him or for-
give it, if not himself? Can one ever ask oneself for forgiveness? But
could one ever ask someone else for forgiveness, given—it seems,
we are told—that I have to identify sufficiently with the other, with
the victim, to ask him for forgiveness knowing of what I speak;
knowing, in order to experience it in turn, in place of him, the evil
that I have done to him? the evil that I continue to do to him, at the
very moment of asking for forgiveness, that is to say at the moment
of betraying him still, of prolonging the forsaking [parjure] that
the pledge [fou juré] will already have consisted of, its very inﬁdi-
delity? This question of the plea, this prayer for forgiveness to be
given, seeks its undiscoverable location on the edge of literature, in
the replacement of this “in the place of” that we recognized in the
son’s letter to his father as the father’s letter to his son, from son to
son as if from father to father.

Can one ask someone other than oneself for forgiveness? Can
one ask one’s self for forgiveness?

The two questions are equally impossible: they are the question
of God (the question of “who”), of God’s name, of what God’s name
means (the question of “what”), the question of forgiveness about
which we have spoken, dividing as it does between the “who” and
the “what.” But dividing in such a way, also, as to discredit and ruin
the distinction in advance, this impossible delineation of “who” and
“what.” Two questions to which one is always expected to respond
yes and no, neither yes nor no.

Can that be forgiven?

For a French speaker who, short of any other context, wonders
what to be forgiven (se pardonner) means, and whether it is possible,
there reside in the expression se pardonner and in the ambiguity
of its grammar two or three possibilities. First—but we consider
such an eventuality to be a contingency—there would be this im-
personal passivity of the turn of phrase “this fault is forgiven” to
signify “one forgives it,” “it is forgiven,” “it is forgivable.” Let us
look more closely at the other two possibilities, at the recipro-
city between one and another and/or the reflexivity of self to self:
pardoning each other” and/or “pardonning oneself.” A possibility
and/or impossibility that is marked by two syntaxes, each of which
remains, in its own way, identiﬁcatory and specular. It is a matter of
what one might call, displacing the expression a little, a speculative
grammar of forgiveness.

In terms of a trajectory toward a destination, how did Kafka’s let-
ter from his father inscribed within the letter to his father function?

1. Pardonner is intransitive in French, hence the passive “to be forgiven” can be
conveyed only through the reﬂexive form se pardonner, and not by an ordinary pas-
itive as in English.—Trans.
the letter within Kafka's father's letter to his son (du père de Kafka au fils), who was signatory of the letter to Kafka's father (au père de Kafka), through all the genitives and all the signatures of this genealogy of forgiveness? Undeniably, the letter from father to son is also a letter from son to father and from son to son, a letter of one's own [une lettre à soi, also "to itself, to himself"] whose stakes remain those of forgiving the other by forgiving oneself. Fictive, literary, secret, but not necessarily private, the letter remains, without remaining, between the son and himself. But, sealed deep within the heart—in secrecy, or at least in the secretary—of a son who writes to himself in order to exchange without exchanging this abyssal forgiveness with him who is his father (who in truth becomes his father and bears that name on the basis of this incredible scene of forgiveness), this secret letter becomes literature, in the literality of its letter(s), only once it exposes itself and risks becoming something public and publishable, an archive to be inherited, still a phenomenon, one of inheritance, or a will that Kafka doesn't destroy. For, as in the sacrifice of Isaac, which took place without witnesses, or whose only surviving witness was the son, namely a chosen beneficiary who saw his father's tortured visage at the moment he lifted the knife over him, it all comes down to us only in the trace left by an inheritance, a trace that remains legible but equally illegible. This trace left behind, this legacy, also represents, whether by design or by unconscious prudence, the chance or risk of becoming a testamentary utterance within a literary corpus, becoming literary just by being left behind [par cet abandon même]. That abandonment is abandoned to its own drift by the undecidability—and hence by the secret—by the destannance of the origin and the end, of destination and addressee, of the sense and referent of the reference abiding as reference in its very suspension. All of that belongs to a literary corpus that is as undecidable as the signature of son and/or father, as undecidable as the voices and acts that are exchanged in it without exchanging anything (Kafka's "real" father, no more than Abraham, perhaps understood nothing, received nothing, heard nothing from his son; he perhaps was more asinine [bête] than all the said beasts, the ass and the ram who were perhaps the only ones thinking and seeing what was going on, what was happening to them, the only ones to know, in their bodies, who pays the price when men are forgiven, forgive each other, or forgive among themselves. I indeed said "men" and not "women," for the woman—about whom we shall see why and how she remains, like a wife, to be "taken"—clearly remains absent, spectacularly omitted from these scenes of forgiveness between father and son). A corpus as undecidable, therefore, as the exchange without exchange of a forgiveness that is named, requested, and granted as soon as it is named, a forgiveness so originary, a priori, and automatic, in short so narcissistic that one wonders whether it really took place, outside of literature. For the said "real" father knew nothing of it. Does a literary or fictive forgiveness amount to one? Unless it were the case that the most effective experience, the concrete endurance of a forgiveness either requested or granted, had—from the moment it became part and parcel of the postulation of secrecy—its destiny guaranteed in the cryptic gift of the poem, in the body of the literary crypt, as we were suggesting earlier in relation to "Todtnauburg," the scene of forgiveness between Heidegger and Celan. Forgiveness would thus be the poem, the gift of the poem. It doesn't have to be asked for. Contrary to what is often understood, in essence it must not be a response to a request.

In the "being forgiven" or "forgiving oneself" of the speculative grammar of Letter to My Father, we recognized a scene of forgiveness that was at the same time requested and granted, of and by oneself. That seems to be something that is both required and forbidden, inevitable and impossible, necessary and insignificant in the very test of forgiveness, in the essence or becoming-forgiveness of forgiveness. If there is a secret secret to forgiveness, it resides in its seeming to be destined at the same time to remain secret and to manifest itself (as secret), but also, by the same token, by means of specular identification, to become self-forgiveness, forgiveness of the self by itself, requested and granted by self to self in the ambiguity of se pardonner; but also canceled, deprived of sense by this very narcissistic reflexivity. Whence the risk of its sublated and sublating [relevée et relevante] nature, of the Aufhebung that we
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can get a taste of by citing another literary example that precisely seasons the code of speculative idealism with that of taste and cooking, namely *The Merchant of Venice* ("when mercy seasons [relieve] justice"). One should ask forgiveness only of the other, the wholly other, the infinitely and irreducibly other other, and one should forgive only the infinitely other other—which is called "God" and at the same time excludes "God," the other name for forgiveness of oneself, for the *se-pardonner*.

As we have noted, after the flood comes God's retraction (let's not call it his repentance), this fallback movement by means of which God goes back on what he has done. In this way he doesn't just do an about-face vis-à-vis the evil done to man, that is to say, precisely, to a creature in whose heart malevolence dwells from the beginning and in such a way that God's abomination in the form of the flood will already have signified a sanction, a response, the retraction of a punishment corresponding to the crime in the flesh of this creature, in the creature as flesh. Moreover, the evil in the heart of man must already have impelled the latter to expiation and pleas for forgiveness: an exchange of forgivenesses [*pardon contre pardon*] in the same way that one speaks of quid pro quo gifts. God's retraction, his promise not to do it again, to do nothing more evil, goes well beyond the human, which is the only species accused of malevolence. God retracts vis-à-vis *every thing living*. He retracts before himself, speaking to himself, but about every living thing and animality in general. And the covenant he is soon to make is a commitment with respect to every living thing.

We cannot become mired here in the immense (semantic and exegetical) question of God's retraction, of his going back on himself and on his creation, the question of all these movements of reflection and memory that lead him to go back over his shortcomings, as if he were at the same time finite and infinite (and we could also follow this tradition in Meister Eckhart, Jacob Boehme, Hegel, etc.). These cases of turning back on oneself should not be hastily translated as "regret," "remorse," or "repentance," even if the temptation to do so is strong and perhaps legitimate. Let us consider simply the doubling over, the retraction of a retraction, the sort of repentance of repentance that envelops, as it were, the covenant with Noah, his descendants, and the animals. Between two cases of God's going back on himself, between two retractions, the one that provokes the flood and the one that interrupts it, in the mean-time [*entre-temps*] of these two quasi-repentances on God's part, Noah is as if twice forgiven. On two occasions he finds grace. As though the Covenant between father and son could be sealed only through a repetition, a double coming-back, the coming back on oneself of this retreat or retraction, which, I insist, must not at this point be loaded with the attributes that a psychology, theology, or dogmatics to come will project upon regret, remorse, or repentance. Unless the latter notions were to depend, in their bottomless foundation, upon God's going back on himself, on this contract with the self by means of which God contracts to go back on himself in this way. The dissymmetrical contract of the Covenant seems thus to suppose the double trait of this retreat (*Entzug* in German), God's redoubled retraction.

If the texts that we are going to read seem, therefore, to mean (to say) something—but do they want to say it? or are they asking us for forgiveness for not meaning (to say)?—it is perhaps something that should be heard even before any act of faith, before any accreditation granting them any status whatsoever: revealed word, myth, phantasmatic production, symptom, allegory of philosophical knowledge, poetic or literary fiction, etc. It is perhaps this minimal postulation, this nominal definition, which should then be connected with what we earlier called an "absolute axiom": a property of what is here called "God," "Jahweh," "Adonai," the tetragram, etc., consists in being able to retract, what others might call "to repent." This "God" has the attribute of being able to recall (himself), and to recall to himself that what he did was not necessarily well done, not perfect, not without fault or flaw. That would be the (hi)story of "God." On the other hand, even if one remains content to analyze the semantics of inherited words and concepts, namely inheritance itself, it is difficult to think a retraction that doesn't imply, at least in a virtual state, within the gesture of an avowal, a plea for forgiveness.

But asked by God of whom? Only two hypotheses are possible there, and they hold for every forgiveness: it can be asked either of
the other or of oneself. The two possibilities remain irreducible, it is true, and yet they come down to the same thing. If I ask forgiveness of the other, of the victim of my fault, a victim therefore, necessarily, of some betrayal or broken oath, I am identifying myself with the other at least virtually, through the movement of retraction by which I affect, auto-affect or hetero-affect, myself. Forgiveness is thus always asked—by means of retraction—of oneself or of another, of another self. Here God would be asking virtual forgiveness of his creation, of his creature as of himself, for the fault he committed by creating humans who are evil in their hearts—which in the first place means, as we will hear, desiring humans, humans subject to sexual difference, men meant for woman, men moved by the desire to take a woman or wife. In any case, before one can detect in it any particular status and value, before one has to believe in it or not, this inherited text offers this reading: forgiveness is a history of God. It is written or addressed to the name of God. Forgiveness comes to pass as a covenant between God and God through the human. It comes to pass through the body of man, through the flaw that crosses through man [à travers le travers de l'homme], through man's evil or fault, which is nothing but his desire, and the place of the forgiveness of God, according to the genealogy, inheritance, and filiation of this double genitive. Saying that forgiveness is a history of God, an affair between God and God—and we humans are found from one end to the other of it—provides neither a reason for nor a means of dispensing with it. At least we have to realize that as soon as one says or hears "pardon"—and, for example, "pardon for not meaning (to say)"—well, God is mixed up in it. More precisely, the name of God has already been whispered. Conversely, as soon as one says "God" around us, someone is in the process of whispering "pardon." [Although reporting this anecdote is not essential to what I am developing here, I remember how one day on the sidelines of a dissertation defense Lévinas told me, with a sort of sad humor and ironic protestation: "Nowadays, when one says 'God,' one almost has to ask for forgiveness or excuse oneself: 'God,' if you'll pardon the expression ... ."]

The first moment of divine retraction arrives when, as humans multiply on the surface of the earth, God sees their desire. It isn't said that God is jealous, but that he sees men desiring. His retraction begins when he sees man's desire, and sees that he is responsible for creating that desire. He sees that men perceive that "the daughters of men were fair." "And they took them wives of all which they chose" (Genesis 6:2). In Chouraqui's translation they took for themselves these daughters who were "fine [bien]."

As always, desire is what engenders fault. It is (the) failing itself. It therefore governs the logic of repentance and forgiveness. Seeing that men were appropriating women for themselves, that they took wives (and, as in Letter to My Father, the scene of forgiveness, like that of betrayal and of broken oaths, turns around "taking a woman or wife"), God says (but to whom? he says it to himself therefore), "My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years" (Genesis 6:3).

Hence God "repents himself," as the Dhormes translation has it (noting also, in all seriousness, that "anthropomorphisms" abound in the narratives of chapters 2, 4, and 6); he "regrets" writes Chouraqui, to render a word that seems—or so they told me in Jerusalem—to mean something like "to console oneself." He goes in reverse in order to mourn, as it were, consoling himself. Apparently the verb has a relation of etymological resemblance with the proper name of Noah, as is often the case. But in spite of the small difference between "repent" and "regret," the two translations that I am citing are in agreement in saying, by means of the same expression, that Noah found "grace" in the eyes of Jahweh. Having regretted or repented for doing evil by creating such guileful [mali] humans, God in effect decides to exterminate the human race and to eliminate every trace of life on earth. He will thus extend the


4. Dhormes: "Mon esprit ne restera pas toujours dans l'homme, car il est encore chair. Ses jours seront de cent vingt ans." Chouraqui: "Mon souffle ne durera pas dans le glèbeux en pérennité. Dans leur égarement, il est chair: ses jours sont de cent vingt ans."
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genocidal annihilation to every living species, to all his creatures, with the gracious exception of Noah, his loved ones, and a couple from each animal species:

And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.

And the Lord said [but to whom is he now speaking? in secret or out loud? Is this not the origin of literature?], I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repented b me that I have made them.

But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord.

These are the generations of Noah. (Genesis 6:5–9)

For our purposes here I shall simply recall, without reading it in its entirety, that Chouraqui's translation twice has "regret" rather than "repent," whereas it uses the same word "grace" for the fate that is reserved for Noah.

However one interprets the logic of this scene, one will hesitate forever between justice and perversion, as much in the act of reading as in what is given to read. We know the outcome of the grace that Noah finds in Jahweh's eyes, but does one have the right to translate it as "forgiveness?" Nothing, it seems to me, forbids that. God forgives Noah, him alone, along with his loved ones and a couple from each animal species. But in circumscribing his grace in such a terrible way, he punishes and destroys every other life on earth. Yet he proceeds to this very nearly absolute pangenocide in order to punish, and in a sudden feeling of regret for, an evil that, in short, he has himself committed: that of creating humans with evil in their hearts. As if he wouldn't forgive humans and the other living creatures for his own fault, the evil within them, namely their desire, whereas it was he who committed the sin of putting it in them. As if, in short, by the same token, he wouldn't forgive himself for the misdeed, the evil produced by his creation, namely man's desire.

MORE THAN ONE

If one is still wondering how and why, while regretting a misdeed [mefait], a bad-deed [mal-fait] over which he consoles himself badly, he allows himself to show mercy to or pardon [gracier] Noah and his loved ones, and to punish all other living things, let us now take into account two considerations relating to the sentence. In the first place Noah is said, immediately after this, to be a "just man." If therefore he is pardoned for being just, and God recognizes him as a just man, it is in the end because he is more just than God himself, not the God who recognizes him as just (one must be just for that), but the very God who has still to regret an evil from which he cannot exempt himself or for which he has difficulty forgiving himself. As if—I often say "as if" by design, as if I didn't mean (to say) what I am saying, and that would constitute the entry of revelation into literature—God were asking forgiveness of Noah or before Noah by making the pact or covenant with him immediately after that.

In the second place, by also pardoning the pairs of animals taken into the Ark, by refraining from killing off the promise of life and regeneration, God doesn't pardon only Noah, his loved ones, and the couples from each species. By means of the justice shown to Noah he pardons by means of example a life to come, a life whose future or rebirth he wants to save. The Covenant works through this incredible grace, about which it is at bottom really difficult to know who grants it to whom, in the name of whom and of what.

Indeed, this punishment, grace, and covenant in the name of whom and of what? Apparently it is directed from God to Noah and his loved ones. But God punishes and pardons in order to forgive himself by having himself forgiven, in order to regret the evil and to pardon himself. And lo and behold the grace accorded to himself through the metonymy of Noah, in the name of God in the name of Noah, is extended exemplarily, even metonymically to all life, to all life to come, to all life to come back. Just before the Flood, after regretting the evil in his creation, God in fact says to Noah, "But with thee will I establish my covenant" (Genesis 6:18). Noah the Just is then 600 years old. At the point of commanding

5. "J'établirai mon alliance avec toi" (Dhormes); "Je lève mon pacte avec toi " (Chouraqui).
him to board the ark God will say to him, “For thee have I seen righteous before me” (7:1).² The moment of the Covenant is thus situated within the great abyss of these forty days. Announced and promised at the beginning of the deluge, this moment is repeated and confirmed when, as Noah is arranging the “burnt-offerings” [holocaustes (Dhormes), montées (Chouraqui)] on the altar, God announces without regret, granted, but promising not to do it again, that he will no more curse the ground because of man, whose heart is evil, and that he will no more smite every living thing. By blessing Noah and his sons God confirms the covenant or the pact but also man's power over living things, over the animals of the earth. As though the covenant and abyssal forgiveness went hand in hand with man's sovereignty over the other living things. A terrifying sovereignty, whose terror is at the same time felt and imposed by the human, inflicted on the other living things. All that within the specularity of a God who has made man “in his own image,” as his “replication” [réplique (Chouraqui)].

And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply; and replenish the earth.

And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered.

Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you; even as the green herb have I given you all things.

But flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof, shall ye not eat.

And surely your blood of your lives will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it, and at the hand of man; at the hand of every man's brother will I require the life of man.

Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God made he man.

². “J'ai vu que tu étais juste devant moi” (Dhormes); “Oui, j'ai vu, toi, un juste face à moi” (Chouraqui).

7. Dhormes: “Elohim bénit Noé et ses fils. Il leur dit: ‘Fructifiez et multipliez-vous, remplissez la terre! La crainte et l'effroi que vous inspirerez s'imposeront à tous les animaux de la terre et à tous les oiseaux des cieux.’” [Chouraqui: “Votre frêmesissement, votre effarement seront sur tout vivant de la terre. (Your quivering, your trepidation, will be upon every living thing on the earth).” Dhormes, moreover, makes clear in a note that “the fear and dread that you will inspire (la crainte et l'effroi que vous inspirerez)” is literally “your fear and your dread.” As if terror could be inspired only by first being felt and shared.] Tous ceux dont fourmille le sol et tous les poissons de la mer, et tous les membres de l'homme, et tous qui respirent et qui vit vous servira de nourriture, comme l'herbe verte: je vous ai donné tout cela. Seulement vous ne mangerez point la chair avec son âme, c'est-à-dire son sang. Pour ce qui est de votre sang, je le réclamerai, comme vos âmes: je le réclamerai de la main de tout animal, je réclamerai l'âme de l'homme de la main de l'homme, de la main d'un chacun l'âme de son frère. Qui répand le sang de l'homme, son sang par l'homme sera répandu, car à l'image d'Elohim, Elohim a fait l'homme. Quant à vous, fructifiez et multipliez-vous, foisonnez sur la terre et ayez autorité sur elle.”

And you, be fruitful, and multiply; bring forth abundantly in the earth, and multiply therein. (Genesis 9:1-7)

With his promise of a Covenant with man and all living things, God therefore undertakes not to start doing evil again. He will take steps so that “neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth” (9:11). But in order to avoid this misdeed or infamy he will need an aide-mémoire or mnemonic, a sign in the world, a mnemonic-technique that will no longer have the merely spontaneous form of a living and autoaffective memory. That sign will be the meteoric rainbow: “And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth” (9:16). “I will memorize my pact (je mémoriserai mon pacte)” is Chouraqui’s translation.

Immediately following that (Genesis 9:22), we are reminded that Ham saw his father's nakedness and reported it to his brothers. Is that a chance sequence of events? The fable that we never stop recounting, the ellipse of time of every (bi)story, is also the nudity of the father. When, after so many generations, the covenant is renewed with Abraham, it still occurs between two different times, before and after the supreme test. To begin, in a first time, God announces his covenant by commanding Abraham to be just and
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perfect (17:1–2), then, second time, after the said sacrifice of Isaac he confirms the same by swearing that he will bless him and multiply his seed (22:16–18). Let us pass in a single leap over all the cases of forgiveness and pardon such as the one Abraham asks for the righteous inhabitants of Sodom (18:22–33). Let us pass in a single leap over all the oaths, for example the covenant sworn with Abimelech at Beersheba, a covenant made in God's name (21:22–33), just before the trial involving the sacrifice of Isaac. Let us come back, all too rapidly, to what I began by calling the absolute axiom.

The axiom obliges us to pose or to suppose a demand for secrecy, a secret asked by God, by him who proposes or promises the covenant. Such a secret does not have the sense of something to hide as Kierkegaard seems to suggest. In the trial to which God submits Abraham, by means of the impossible command (for which one and the other have, in a way, to be forgiven), by means of the interruption of the sacrifice which resembles yet another pardon or a reward for keeping the secret, fidelity to the implicitly requested secret does not essentially relate to the content of something to hide (the command to make the sacrifice, etc.), but rather to the pure singularity of the face-to-face with God, the secret of this absolute relation. It is a secret without content, without any sense to be hidden, any secret other than the very request for secrecy, that is to say the absolute exclusivity of the relation between the one who calls and the one who responds “Fiere I am:” the condition of appeal and response, if there ever is such a thing, and presuming it can be conceived of in all purity. From that moment on there is nothing more sacred in the world for Abraham, for he is ready to sacrifice everything. This test would thus be a sort of absolute desacralization of the world. Besides, since there is no content to the secret itself, one cannot even say that the secret to be kept is sacred, that it is the only remaining sacredness. At the outside one could call it “holy [saint]” (in the sense of “separate”), but not sacred. (If literature, the modern thing that legitimately bears that name, “desacralizes” or “secularizes” the Scriptures, holy or sacred Scripture, it thereby repeats the sacrifice of Isaac, stripping it bare, delivering it and exposing it to the world.) As if God were to have said to Abraham, “Don't speak of it to anyone, not so that nobody knows (and in fact, it is not a question of knowledge), but so that there is no third party between us, nothing of what Kierkegaard will call the generality of the ethical, political, or juridical. Let there be no third party between us, no generality, no calculable knowledge, no conditional deliberation, no hypothesis, no hypothetical imperative, so that the covenant remains absolute and absolutely singular in its act of election. You will undertake not to open yourself up to anyone else. (Today we would say: 'You will not confide in anyone, you won't have confidence in any member of your family, you will open yourself neither to your loved ones, your relatives, or your friends, even if they are among the closest of the closest, you won't let your absolute confidants, your confessor, and especially not your psychoanalyst, suspect anything. ') If you do, you will be betraying, breaking, and cheating on the absolute covenant that exists between us. And you are to be faithful, you must, at all costs, in the worst moment of the most extreme test, even if to do so means having to put to death what is dearest to you in the world, your son, that is to say in truth the future itself, the promise of a promise.”

In order for this request to have the sense of a trial, the veritable object of the divine injunction had to be something other than putting Isaac to death. Moreover, what interest could God have in the death of this child, even if it were offered as a sacrifice? That is something he will never have said or meant to say. The putting to death of Isaac therefore becomes secondary, which is an even more monstrous eventuality. In any case it is not the thing to be hidden, the content of a secret that is to be safeguarded. It has no sense. And everything will hang on this suspension of sense. God's injunction, his command, his request, his imperious prayer, are designed only to test Abraham's endurance, to put it to the test of an absolutely singular appeal. It is only a matter of his determination, his passive-and-active commitment not-to-be-able-to-mean-to-say, to keep a secret even under the worst conditions, hence unconditionally. To enter into an unconditionally singular covenant with God. Simply in order to respond, in a responsible way, to answer to the coreponsibility that is committed to by means of the appeal. That is the test of unconditionality in love, namely the oath sworn between two absolute singularities.
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In order for that to be, nothing must be said and everything—at bottom, at the bottomless depths of this bottom—must mean (to say) nothing. "Pardon for not meaning (to say) . . . ." In short, the secret to be kept would have, at bottom, to be without an object, without any object other than the conditionally singular covenant, the mad love between God, Abraham, and what descends from him. His son and his name.

In the case of what descends from him, however, the singularity is sealed but necessarily betrayed by the inheritance that confirms, reads, and translates the covenant. By the testament itself.

What would literature have to do with the testamentary secret of this "pardon for not meaning (to say) . . . ." with the inheritance of this promise and this betrayal, with the forswearing that haunts this oath? What would literature have to do with a forgiveness [pardon] for the secret kept that could be a "pardon for not meaning (to say) . . . ."? In other words, in what way does literature descend from Abraham, in order to inherit from him at the same time as it betrays him? And in order to ask forgiveness for its broken oath? "Pardon for not meaning (to say) . . . ." Is literature this forgiveness that is requested for the desacralization, what others would religiously call the secularization of a holy revelation? Forgiveness requested for the betrayal of the holy origin of forgiveness itself?

Whereas literature (in the strict sense, as modern Western institution) implies in principle the right to say everything and to hide everything, which makes it inseparable from a democracy to come;

whereas the presumed fictive structure of every work exonerates its signatory from responsibility, before political or civic law, for its sense and referent (what the inside of the text means and aims at, exhibits and encrypts, with the result that the text can always not stop setting down any sense or referent, not meaning [to say] anything), while at the same time increasing in inverse proportion, to infinity, responsibility for the singular event constituted by every work (a void and infinite responsibility, like that of Abraham);

whereas the secrets or effects of secrecy encrypted in such a literary event do not have to answer or correspond to any sense or reality in the world and appeal for a suspension of such (not for suspending reference, but for suspending, or placing within pa-

renctheses or quotation marks the thesis or arrest, the placing or stopping of determinate sense or real referent, whence the properly phenomenological, and therefore meteoric virtue of the literary phenomenon);

whereas literature is the place of all these secrets without secrecy, of all these crypts without depth, with no other basis than the abyss of the call or address, without any law other than the singularity of the event called the work;

whereas this literary right to fiction presumes a history that institutes an authorization (the status of an irresponsible and hyperresponsible author) of the performative decision to produce events which, to the extent that they are language acts, constitute so many addresses and responses;

whereas the coming about of this right implies an indissoluble covenant between an extreme autonomy (the democratic freedom of each and of all, etc.) and an extreme heteronomy (this right is given and may be withdrawn, being limited to the precarious frontier of the contract that demarcates literature on the basis of external criteria: no phrase is literary in itself nor does it reveal its "literariness" by means of an internal analysis; it becomes literary and acquires its literary function only according to context and convention, that is to say from nonliterary powers);

be it understood that literature surely inherits from a holy history within which the Abrahamic moment remains the essential secret (and who would deny that literature remains a religious remainder, a link to and relay for what is sacrosanct in a society without God?), while at the same time denying that history, appurtenance, and heritage. It denies that filiation. It betrays it in the double sense of the word: it is unfaithful to it, breaking with it at the very moment when it reveals its "truth" and uncovers its secret. Namely that of its own filiation: impossible possibility. This "truth" exists on the condition of a denial whose possibility was already implied by the binding of Isaac.

Literature can but ask forgiveness for this double betrayal. There is no literature that does not, from its very first word, ask for forgiveness. In the beginning was forgiveness. For nothing. For meaning (to say) nothing.
We shall stop here at the moment when God swears. Suspending the sacrifice by his own initiative, sending down his angel with a second address, he cries out, calls Abraham and swears. But he swears only before himself, saying it, avowing it, or claiming it. How could he do otherwise? Could he mean (to say) anything other than this tautology that means (to say) nothing?

At this instant, and on the basis of this instant alone, autonomy and heteronomy no longer add up to but One, yes, more than One [ne sont plus qu'Un, oui, plus qu'Un].

And the angel of the Lord called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time,

And said, By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son;

That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies. (Genesis 22:15-17, my emphasis) 8

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8. Dhormes: “L'Ange de Iahvé appela Abraham une deuxième fois du haut des cieux et dit: 'Par moi-même j'ai juré—oracle de Iahvé—que, puisque tu as fait cette chose et tu n'as pas refusé ton fils, ton unique, je te bénirai et je multiplierai ta race comme les étoiles des cieux et comme le sable qui est sur le rivage de la mer, si bien que ta race occupera la Porte de ses ennemis.'” Chouraqui: “Le messager de IhwH crie à Abraham/une deuxième fois des ciels. Il dit: 'Je le jure par moi, harangue de IhwH/oui, puisque tu as pris cette parole/et que tu n'as pas épargné ton fils, ton unique,/oui, je te bénirai, je te bénirai,/je multiplierai ta race,/comme les étoiles des cieux,/comme le sable, sur la lèvre de la mer:/ta race hériterà la porte de ses ennemis.'”