

## An Interview With Professor Jacques Derrida

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### Uniqueness, Limitation and Forgivability

Q- I would like to present questions on two different levels: the first one has to do with “after Auschwitz” as a recognized and articulated turning-point in certain currencies within continental philosophy; the second one has to do with your own work, often referred to as “deconstruction” in this context. Nevertheless, it seems inevitable that both levels would meet as we go along in our conversation. Last Monday, on the 5th of January, you were giving a seminar in Jerusalem, tackling the idea of forgiveness through a dialogue with the work of Jankelevitch. Do you consider this work as symptomatic of French or perhaps French-Jewish engagement with the Holocaust since the 60s? Would you connect Jankelevitch's notion of the unforgiven with certain experience or phase in either Jewish or French work of mourning in the post-Vichy era?

D- Thank you. Many difficult questions. Before beginning this interview, I'd like to insist on one or two things. First, the problems we are about to approach are problems that have been with us so constantly, and have marked our memory, have marked our attention even when we're not paying attention, even when we don't explicitly think of them. The Shoah or the Holocaust has marked our experience so ubiquitously, that it is difficult both to isolate it as a topic and then, in an interview such as this, to assemble all the reflections that have not ceased accumulating ever since. I feel very uneasy about isolating the topic of the Holocaust in a conversation improvised in Jerusalem, when somehow the conscious or unconscious memory of this event is everywhere in our culture, everywhere in my own life as well as in that of the members of

my generation. I'd like, then, to confess my unease before such a conversation. Nevertheless, I will try not to dodge the questions and the invitation given me.

So, of course, I don't think it would be serious to reduce all the work in which I've been involved under the name of "deconstruction," since you've alluded to this, to reduce it to something to be explained by the "After Auschwitz." I believe this would be neither right nor serious. Still, to an extent, I believe that this work, as I have undertaken it or as it has imposed it self upon me, would not have had the same form or the same urgency had the great issues of Western rationality, of Western philosophy, of the Western metaphysics of Europe, not been somehow called into question, first by twentieth century totalitarianism, but more uniquely by something like the Holocaust. Obviously, trying to think the Holocaust is a difficult task, which assumes at least asking oneself how Western culture, dominated by what is called philosophy, by Judeo-Christian traditions, etc., could have made possible, or not have made impossible, an event such as the one named Auschwitz or the Shoah.

Naturally, at the same time, I must recognize, like others, but in a particularly acute manner, that I have had many problems in naming this thing. The idea of the name to be given to what is called for the sake of convenience: Shoah, Holocaust, Auschwitz. For me the question of the name, that is of the singularity of this event, has always remained suspended, open, has always been a matter for debates, even disagreements with many of my contemporaries, contemporary philosophers. We shall undoubtedly return to this: I believe that this event is unique in a certain sense. But what does the word 'unique' mean in this case? Any event is unique, any crime is unique, any death is unique. So what would constitute the singular uniqueness of the Shoah? This for me is a topic of anxious reflection, also of debates with many other philosophers. This question is not closed; I see it, even today, being launched again in a new way, notably in France. I don't know if I can, today, be quite clear on this subject, especially under these conditions.

But to return to the part of your question concerning the lecture about forgiveness I gave in Jerusalem the other night, that a great deal had to do with Jankelevitch, let me recall two or three things. [Vladimir] Jankélevitch, who is a French philosopher of Jewish Russian origin, wrote a philosophical book on forgiveness, on the Jewish-Christian-Greek history of this concept. This book, written in the early sixties, did not deal with the Shoah or the Holocaust. It was a philosophical book on the ethics of forgiveness, on the concept of forgiveness, on the heritage of this concept. A very strong book, which, inscribing itself in a certain manner within the Judeo-Christian tradition, recommended what Jankélevitch himself called a hyperbolic ethics of forgiveness, that is the absolute commandment to forgive evil: even if evil is stronger than forgiveness, forgiveness must be stronger than evil. Thus, he maintained a certain prescription of absolute forgiveness.

And then, since we're speaking of France, in 1964 the French Parliament adopted a law on the non-limitation [imprescriptibilité] of crimes against humanity, thus referring to the concept of crime against humanity, that had been developed and written into law by the Nuremberg tribunal in 1945. This concept is very obscure, very difficult to outline or ground. Nevertheless, it does exist as a legal concept. Naturally, everything we're talking about falls under this category of crime against humanity. So, in 1964 the French Parliament adopted a law making any crime against humanity exempt from the statute of limitation [imprescriptible], so that it must always be possible to prosecute perpetrators of crimes against humanity. The statute of limitation [la prescription], in French legal language, means that after a certain date, generally twenty years, crimes are no longer prosecuted. Thus there is a sort of moratorium; not forgiveness but moratorium, annulment of the judicial process. In 1964 the French Parliament decided that crimes against humanity should always remain exempt from limitation, that is, that it should be possible for all eternity to judge and condemn the perpetrators of crimes against humanity.

In 1964 there were great debates in the French press and intellectual circles about this recently-adopted law. And it was then that Jankélevitch took a stand: he wrote another little book entitled *L'Imprescriptible* and subtitled *Pardonner*, where he quite deliberately said rather the opposite of what he had said in his earlier book. And he maintained that one should not forgive, that the crimes against humanity committed during what is called the Holocaust or the Shoah could not be forgiven precisely because they exceeded the measure of any kind of human judgement, they were out of proportion to any law, any human judgement, any human punishment, and consequently there was no knowing what to forgive. He maintained that furthermore the Germans or the Nazis (he speaks sometimes of the German people, sometimes of the Germans, sometimes of the Nazis) had never asked forgiveness. He thus positioned himself within a logic where forgiving someone required that the other ask forgiveness and show awareness of being at fault. And he very vehemently declared that forgiveness had died in the death camps, that forgiveness no longer made any sense.

It was this attitude that I examined the other night, pointing out where it could be called into question. I neither agreed nor disagreed with Jankélevitch. I'm trying to think what forgiveness may mean in this respect, the relation between forgiveness and limitation. And I must say that in the relation I try to have with all these events I have no cut-and-dry positions. It is really a constant source of the re-problematization of all these problems. When I speak of forgiveness, of hospitality, it is always by reference to this event, whose very uniqueness is problematic. I know that it is unique, of course. But as to knowing whether one can make this uniqueness into an example and exemplary point of reference, for me this remains very problematic with regard to other genocides.

Recently, just a few weeks ago, after the Church of France asked forgiveness of God for its attitude to the Jews during the War and has called the Jewish community to witness its asking forgiveness of God, Cardinal Lustiger, about a week later, he too made this very strong and very enigmatic statement, to

the effect that not only was the Shoah unique and exemplary, but that any genocide in the world re-enacted that in the Shoah which was a crime against the people who received the Torah, in other words, against anyone who is before the Law, anyone who accepts the Law. Not only is the Shoah unique, but basically one cannot think of any genocide in the world, be it in Cambodia or elsewhere, without interpreting it as a crime against the man or the men or the people who are the depositories of the Law, of moral Law. This is a rather strong position. I don't know to what extent one may follow Cardinal Lustiger. But this would amount to saying that not only is the Shoah exemplary, but that one cannot even think of another genocide without interpreting it by reference to an extermination aimed, precisely, at annihilating or destroying the relation to the Law, the relation to the Torah, to the people or the body inasmuch as it is on Mount Sinai. Every genocide takes place by reference to Mount Sinai.

So, what does this position mean? Does it mean that the Jewish people are chosen even in this respect, namely that even in the Shoah its election is confirmed and hence its absolute privilege, its alliance with God. Is this a way to reclaim for itself after all a sort of absolute privilege? Or is it an effort to think - thinkingly, as it were - any genocide, any extermination and finally any crime, any crime against humanity, as a crime against the Law, against the Torah, against the commandment "Thou shalt not kill"? In other words, this makes the Shoah into an exception and at the same time amounts to saying that any crime, even a banal, individual crime, which is not even a genocide or extermination, as a crime against some person or against the humanity of some person, cannot be determined as crime except in relation to the "Thou shalt not kill" of the Torah, and is thus an attempt to kill the "Thou shalt not kill," to put to death the major moral prescription, that which Levinas holds to be the major one. For Levinas, the "Thou shalt not kill" is not just one commandment in a series of commandments; it is the Law itself. This is where ethical experience begins: in the "Thou shalt not kill." The crime against humanity is an attack against the Torah, against the "Thou shalt not kill." But whether this happens in Cambodia or in South Africa or anywhere else, it is always, ultimately, the same reference to the Torah.

When a high dignitary of the Catholic Church of France (born Jewish, in fact) says this, what is he doing? Is he merely recalling something obvious? Is he consecrating the absolute privilege of the Jewish people, even in its infinite disaster? Or is he merely describing what is understood as moral Law? This is what the moral Law is. I have no cut-and-dry answer to this question, but this is the question I try to ask myself, the question I tried, the other day, in a different manner, to ask with regard to forgiveness. I may have forgotten something in your question.

### Generational Differences

Q- Are there any significant differences between the work of, say, Levinas and that of Jankelevitch? In your opinion, what is the connection between public – juridical, political and social processes, which you mentioned in your talk, namely, the movement from the Gaulist victorious myth to the recognition of France's implication within evil, by acknowledging Vichy's responsibility to crimes against Humanity – and the dynamics within French philosophy?

D- I believe there are, in any case, generational differences in the approach to these problems. It is certain that those who were adults at the time of the Shoah have a relation to it quite unlike that of subsequent generations. It is not only a question of chronological contemporaneity; the time span from one generation to the next, that is to say, twenty five, thirty years, is also a time of the work of mourning, a time during which the personal, the collective and the political unconscious works, and we know that with such monstrous traumas time means a great deal. As to the question of forgiveness, of which we spoke earlier, without the Shoah having been forgotten, there may be a period of the attenuation of the suffering, a distancing of the suffering which is not a forgetting, but which is nevertheless a sort of weakening of the pain that permits other gestures.

For example, when Jankélevitch writes to this young German I mentioned the other day, who told him that even though for his generation he felt innocent of

Nazi crimes, he did have a bad conscience. He makes this gesture of reconciliation towards Jankélevitch. Jankélevitch received this well, but told him: for my generation it is not possible, one cannot go beyond this limit of forgiveness; but for your generation, later, this will be possible. So in his opinion the passage of time could make possible something which was not forgiveness, since the other night I tried to distinguish pure, unconditional forgiveness from all other forms of economy, of excusing, of reconciliation, which are not forgiveness pure and simple. So one may imagine that, while for a generation that witnessed or participated closely in this trauma forgiveness should be impossible, for the following generation, forgiveness remaining still impossible, modes of reconciliation, of re-appropriation, of mourning become somewhat easier.

These generational differences, naturally, are marked in public discourse and in philosophical discourse. For example, in France people interpreted as a generational phenomenon the fact that François Mitterand never agreed, as head of state, to recognize officially the responsibility of France in the crimes of Vichy. He said that Vichy was not the French Republic, that the Republic had been broken off and therefore France as such could not assume the responsibility or the guilt for the crimes against the Jews under Vichy. Many French people, many intellectuals, including myself, wrote to him to ask him to recognize the culpability of France and he was against it, giving his reasons, explaining why he thought it wasn't right for France to blame itself for such an offence, since it hadn't been France, nor the French state, nor the French Republic. This is very complicated, and naturally, I do not agree with this position, but that was the position he took. Besides the fact that in his past, at the beginning of the Vichy regime, he had had some relations with it, this may in any case be explained also by a generational phenomenon; since Jacques Chirac, who does not belong to the same generation, who is younger and became adult a rather long time after the War, Jacques Chirac (for undoubtedly complicated reasons, that we won't get into here), was able to do what Mitterand couldn't do, that is to recognize publicly as head of state, as soon as he was elected, that France under Vichy had committed what he

called the "irreparable." It is a strong declaration, which is still controversial in France today even among Chirac's supporters within his own party.

There is incontestably a generational phenomenon, and surely its marks may be found not only in official political discourses, but even in philosophy. It is certain that, to stay with France, French philosophers like Jean Wahl, Jankélévitch, Lévinas, French Jewish philosophers of that generation, did not have the same experience, the same relation to the Shoah as younger people, for example as members of my generation. As for myself, there is a generational difference, there is also the fact that I am a Jew from Algeria, that I have a more distant relation to the European thing, that I have been more marked by antisemitism in Algeria, which was indeed very violent but did not result in any murders or deportations. There were certainly many exclusions, expulsions from school, from professions, there was much administrative and civil violence, but there were no massive deportations or crimes of the type that took place in Europe. So personally, insofar as I may be determined by my own personal life, even today, I know that I do not have the same relation to the Shoah as the Jews of France, especially those of the preceding generations. Naturally, through thought, through reading, through the archive, through historical information, I have an intense relation to all that. But obviously it is not the same as that of those who lived in Europe, especially the preceding generation. I went to Poland, to Auschwitz, for the first time a few weeks ago, for reasons that are related to all this. For a long time, going to Poland had been a problem for me. But I did go, and I have spoken a great deal about these questions. But I am talking too much. I speak too much.(1)

### Signature, Date and the Risks to Archive and Testimony

Q- The questions that I have tried to present until now were taken from a certain pre-supposition, which has to be articulated as well as justified. For the issue of history and historicity has not been taken as a philosophical given or axiom in every philosophical stream-of-thought. On the contrary, as we all know, your work as well as several other thinkers who dwell in your own intellectually pluralistic environment, has put forward the signature of the



philosopher, his or her proper name, thus creating intentionally both a dated philosophy and a philosophy of the date. How do you reconcile these notions which seem rather contradictory to one another (or perhaps to the very project of philosophizing)? Could one defend such a notion when it seems that once philosophy was actually engaged with its time – during the entre-des-guerres era – it gave support, legitimacy as well as spiritual power, as you yourself put it, to politics? What is the adequate position which philosophy “after Auschwitz” should take towards politics and history?

D- Naturally, we won't be able in a one-hour televised interview to take into account or to take charge of the full philosophical difficulty of the problems you raise. In answering you I'll try to bring this back to our present concern, that is Yad Vashem and the Shoah. It is true that I have constantly tried to work on the question of the signature in philosophy, of the signature and of the date (2). In effect, the classical and dominant gesture of classical philosophers was to present the signature or the date of a philosophical discourse as accidental or empirical, as if philosophical discourse consisted of effacing the signature, the proper name, the date of the philosopher. People like Plato, Kant, Hegel will have done everything so that the systematicity of their discourse would be able to do without any reference to the proper name of the signatory, to the date of their production etc. I tried to call this axiomatic into question. I have done this by reference to many texts by Hegel, Nietzsche, etc.

But to return to the place that concerns us here, each time I wished to bring back the signature and the date onto the stage, I did so either with regard to authors who have had a very marked relation to what we are talking about, that is to say, Nietzsche, for example, and the tradition that leads from Nietzsche to Nazism (in that little text called *Otobiographies*, with regard to Nietzsche's signature, I tried to situate this reflection about the proper name starting from a reference to Nazism and to what we are talking about now), or else with regard to Celan, in *Shibboleth*, where indeed the entire poetics of the date and of the signature were linked to the history of a Jewish poet, whose original language had not been German, but who later became one of the

greatest post-war poets in the German language, who lost his entire family in the camps and in whose work, however one interprets it, the reference to the Shoah is decisive. There is surely nothing fortuitous about the reflection on the date and the signature, that have always concerned me, being linked to the event we're talking about, directly or indirectly. When it occurred to me too, modestly and in my own way, to re-inscribe autobiographical references in my philosophical work (which I've been doing increasingly in *Glas* (3), in *La Carte postale* (4), in *Shibboleth*, and also, recently, in *Circonfession*(5)), naturally this stemmed from the Jewish question, from the question of circumcision and of my relation to Judaism and what is happening or has happened to Judaism in this century. I believe my experience of these problems of the signature and the date to be inseparable, be it directly or indirectly, from what we're talking about this morning, that is to say the Holocaust.

Even if, once again, the uniqueness of this reference is a problem for me. It is at the same time nagging, as is the question of knowing if one should turn only towards the Holocaust or any holocaust, with all the problems of metonymy and exemplarity we spoke of at the beginning. In any case, when one asks oneself what is a date? What is a signature? With the Holocaust we have, unfortunately, a thought-provoking resource that is inexhaustible. At the same time, because, as to the signature, the Holocaust has often consisted of an attempt to erase the names, to erase the proper names, not only to put [people] to death, but to destroy the archive. And Yad Vashem is primarily the memory of names, which is obviously the most moving and remarkable thing, I'd say even troubling, when one walks into Yad Vashem: the first gesture was to restore, to gather and to keep the names. As if the names were really the very thing that the extermination was aimed at. So, at the same time identity and memory, the possibility of calling. The act of Yad Vashem has consisted of keeping the names and the dates, finally, which are inseparable.

For what is a date? A date is an instant, but it is also a place, it is the irreplaceability of the event. And so, somehow, even though any event,

however modest, bears a relation to the name and the date, nevertheless from this point of view Auschwitz is presumably an abysmal experience that the members of my generation, of the generation preceding mine cannot get around. What will it be in the future? I don't know. Your question about the date, the signature and the generation, lead me to think, with some horror, that perhaps, in two or three generations, all this will have been relativized, if not forgotten, and that the Shoah will find its place as one episode, among so many others, of the murderous violence within humanity: there have been other genocides before or after, the Bible is full of horrifying violence, of nations who destroy one another. So one knows that perhaps, in the future, this will be, if not erased or forgotten, at least classed, relativized by being classed.

When an archive such as Yad Vashem is established and kept up, an act of piety and of memory is performed to prevent this from being erased. But at the same time, which is ambiguous and horrifying, it is the very act of archivizing which contributes somehow to classification, relativization and forgetting. Archivization preserves, but it also begins to forget. And it is possible that one day, and one thinks of this with horror, Yad Vashem will be considered as just another monument. Because it is kept, consigned to the exteriority of archives, because it is here between walls, everything has been recorded, a CD Rom was made, the names are on plaques, and so because it is kept, well, it may be lost, it may be forgotten. There is always this risk, and that is the ambiguity of the concept of archive, that I've been concerned with elsewhere, one always runs the risk of losing one keeps and of forgetting precisely where memory is objectivized in acts of consignment, in objective places. (6)

It is a horrifying risk, a horrifying risk that was implied in the very act of extermination, where an attempt was made to traces and testimonies, to a point that later opened the field for all the revisionists. Or rather, there is an archive that remains, a material archive. Naturally, when I went to Auschwitz, I was like everyone else overwhelmed to see those tons of hair, those tons of

shoes, those rooms filled with eye glasses. This is horrifying, it is overwhelming. But, at the same time, since these are only physical records, the revisionists can always say that this was constructed, that proves nothing. What would prove is not physical evidence or archives, it is living testimonies. But by definition, there is no living testimony, either because those who experienced this have disappeared in the crematoria, or because - as these are testimonies which appeal to faith, to belief - it may always be considered that the witnesses lie.

Thus there is always a possibility of either destruction or contestation of the archive and even of testimony. Hence the abyss of problems that keep cropping up with negationism and revisionism. And this is inscribed in the very structure of the extermination.

### Heidegger, the Spirit and European Culture

Q- If you look at the French scene comparing it to the German one after the Holocaust, do you recognize significant differences? How are they to be explained? Why was the response to Heidegger's philosophy preoccupying French thinkers more intensively than Germans? Is it an optical illusion? Were both sides engaged but differently? In what way? Do you recognize a development within your own thought, which is so intimately related to that of Heidegger's, and explicitly so, in what concerns Heidegger's political ontology? Could *De l'esprit* (7) have been written before? Would you write it once again, keeping to your notion that Heidegger's mistake lies in "spiritualizing Nazism"? Does this judgement imply forgiveness?

D- To answer the last question, I wouldn't say that Heidegger's attitude is neither forgivable nor unforgivable. I don't see how I, for one, can formulate the question in these terms. Who would have to forgive Heidegger? Let's begin with the hypothesis that Heidegger's attitude was infinitely guilty. Given this hypothesis, who would have the right to say: "I forgive," or: "I do not forgive"? I don't know. In any case, not I. My relation to this has never been that of a judge, of someone who is in a rush to conclude a book or a speech

with: "Heidegger is guilty and I do not forgive him." It is too difficult for me to do that.

To return to the beginning of your question, of course, there are considerable differences between the attitude to the Shoah of Frenchmen and especially French philosophers and that of Germans and German philosophers. First, for obvious reasons: the French are French, the Germans are German. German guilt, when it was felt, after the War, by German citizens or by German philosophers was such - sometimes there was no sense of guilt, but when this sense existed - it was so massive and violent that they began once more to practically prohibit the reading of certain texts by Nietzsche and Heidegger, notably, who were really banned after the War. Indeed Heidegger was brought to justice, Heidegger was - how shall I put it? - dropped from the curriculum, there was a verdict. In this respect, the official attitude of German philosophers, publicly, in any case, was one of a massive and radical exclusion of works such as those of Nietzsche and Heidegger, and this lasted a long time. It is only now that this censorship, or this discredit, or this disqualification is starting to get lifted.

Whereas in France, things have been more complicated and somehow easier. Heidegger's influence had begun timidly before the War; and after the War, philosophers like Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, and some others, including Lévinas, who were interested in Heidegger, maintained their interest. There was a political debate very early on about Heidegger's attitude during the war, before the War, under Nazism. Very early on, there was in *Temps Modernes* a first wave, and then it subsided, and then there was a great deal of work done, philosophical work, about Heidegger during the 50's, 60's, 70's, without the political question harming this development. And then - a question of time, of generation, of time to undo repression, etc. etc. (all this ought to be analyzed closely) - and as you know, in the mid 80's, there was once more a debate about Heidegger.

I took the position you're aware of, with *De L'Esprit*, where I tried not only simply to ascribe all of Heidegger's actions to what you have called "spiritualization," a certain spiritual humanism, the reference to the spirit. No, I believe that the responsibility for Heidegger's decisions, in any particular circumstance, when he did this or that as rector, when he said this, when he signed a particular text, etc., is a responsibility that must be examined in itself. He was judged for that, and as for me, my concern is not to exonerate him of this responsibility. What I tried to do was to account, to a certain extent, for the philosophical compatibility in his discourse between what he wrote or taught and what he said as rector in his rectorate speech.

The thread I followed was, in fact, that of the reference to the spirit. I cannot reconstitute this work here just like that. But the point for me was not to explain each of Heidegger's gestures by this reference to the spirit, but to try to account for a certain kind of law, I won't say of coherence, but of a law in his philosophical itinerary, that made his Nazi commitment possible or did not make it impossible. And this law I believed I could find in the way he handled, from the very start and for a long time, the reference to the spirit and to the spiritual. I think that if he had been in a position to deconstruct, so to speak, the implications of this spiritualism, this would have meant that he was able to decipher in the Nazi discourse and situation that which unfortunately he did not decipher.

This is a move that consisted neither of accusing Heidegger of the unforgivable nor of exonerating him from his offences, but of beginning to try to understand what was going on in the reference to the spirit. Not only in Heidegger, but also in many other philosophers of that period. So that in *L'Autre cap* (8) or *De l'Esprit* I linked this reference to the spirit to a similar reference, a similar logic to be found in Husserl, in Valéry. So this is not only Heidegger's case. I tried to reconstitute, I won't say a sort of spirit of time, a *Zeitgeist*, but a sort of general constraint that affected all European culture, in order to account not only for Heidegger's offences, but of the general complicity of Europe with the Nazis. Nazism, as I say in *De L'esprit*, did not

just grow like a mushroom. For ten or twelve years European diplomacies, European churches, European universities have, after all, collaborated in their own ways with Nazism. This must be explained. This happened through discourse, through diplomatic arrangements, through silences, looking the other way, bad faith. How could the Church behave in such a manner? How could English and French diplomacy go along, before the War, I mean? Why did they pretend not to understand or see what was happening to the Jews? All this concerns European culture as a whole. And to return briefly to what we were saying in the beginning, this is why a work of deconstruction is work on the history of Europe and on European culture, and it couldn't have taken the forms it has taken without the reference to that European moment which was that of this century or of the inter-war period. So my little book on Heidegger, actually all the texts I have devoted to Heidegger, revolve not only around his work which remains, for me, very powerful as well as very provocative, but also around European thought as a whole, in which Heidegger occupies a place which is so visible and, so to speak, so impossible to get around. (9)

### Forgiveness? Up to the Victims

Q- The latter question can indeed lead us towards the question of Paul de Man, an intimate friend of yours, the “importer” of Decont to the American arena, to the question of friendship and of forgiveness. We will come to this later on. But I have to ask you now, if you could agree or accept the following proposition: “Deconstruction”, through its engagement with texts, through its inter-textuality, which is both enacted and articulated, performed and thematized, constitutes an ongoing commitment to the idea of friendship. This is, indeed, an absolute idea. It is impossible and extreme, and transmits both the feeling of an unbearable solitude (the friend is never “re-appropriated”, always already about to disappear, to part, to depart) and unbearable joy (love, touch); and this categorical imperative – Befriend, be a friend – implies both the “don” and the “pardon”. I'm aware that my formulation is not tight enough. Nevertheless, is pardon an imperative? Is it an imperative “after Auschwitz”? Why? How would you defend this idea? Do you differ between your stance and that of Levinas, who seems also to be so extreme in his

demands concerning one's response to one's persecutor? How is one to explain, then, Levinas' harsh reaction towards Heidegger? We will get back to these issues once again later on.

D- Obviously, it would take hours of talking to answer these questions. I believe that the only time in my life I have written the word 'unforgivable,' published the word 'unforgivable,' was concerning Paul de Man, in a text I have written about him, after this very brief episode in his life had been discovered, when he was twenty years old in Belgium and wrote articles in collaborationist newspapers (10). When these texts were discovered, there were great debates in the United States. I wrote long texts on this subject, but in the first text I wrote, I said that in any case what Paul de Man had done at that moment was unforgivable. This is the word I used. I am not sure I forgive myself for having written this word.

But I did write it. Why did I, rightly or wrongly, write it? At least for two reasons. The first is that I wished to make it clear, in the debate that was starting then - it was a vehement debate, with unspeakable suspicions - that in any case I was not going to play down Paul de Man's offence, that I was as aware of it as the others and that I didn't mean in what I was doing, what I was trying to do at that moment, and at the moment I wished to take my responsibilities, I didn't want to be accused of blindness to the gravity of Paul de Man's offences. So, I said that it was right and strategically advisable to note first, despite my friendship for Paul de Man, despite everything I was about to say in this very complicated article, that I can't summarize here, that it must be made clear that in my view de Man's attitude was unforgivable.

Second reason: I think it is unforgivable simply because any crime and for instance the crime we are talking about... Paul de Man was not guilty of crimes against humanity, he was no butcher, no Nazi; still, he published literary articles in a newspaper that was collaborationist. In any case, for any offence, one does not have the right to forgive unless one is directly its victim. I myself cannot forgive de Man's offence, or that of any collaborator, because



it is up to the victims of these offences, that is to say up to those who perished in the camps, or those who were persecuted by German or Belgian Nazis, it is up to them to forgive if they wish to forgive. But for me this is not forgivable, I have no right to forgive. This is what I wanted to say, at least these two things. Having said this, my conscience is not quiet for having written this. For it is also a way of saying in the absolute that what de Man did is unforgivable, and this I cannot say of anything or anyone. So my conscience is not quiet on the subject of this word I wrote. The only time in my life I have written this word, I wrote it to characterize the conduct of someone who was a friend, in whom I always maintained a deep trust and who was, furthermore, dead. I blame myself still today for having written this word, and it is up to me somehow to ask forgiveness.

Having said this, your question was: "should one forgive after Auschwitz?" I'd say that in no case does anyone have the right to say one should forgive or one should not forgive. Forgiveness - this is what I tried to show the other night in Jerusalem at the University - pure or unconditional forgiveness must be the event or the act of a grace that cannot be commanded. There shouldn't be a duty to forgive or a duty not to forgive. In other words, if pure forgiveness, with regard to Auschwitz or anything whatever, is to take place, it is for each person to come to it, to take responsibility for it in a unique way without entering into any economy of judgement, of penalty, of punishment, etc. Forgiveness is within our domain; this is why I distinguished forgiveness from limitation, from limitability. I don't believe that the experience of forgiveness, if such there be, can lend itself to judgements of the order of: "Now one must forgive," or: "One must not forgive." The question of limitation, the legal, political question is quite different from the question of forgiveness. But as to forgiveness, only the victims have the right to forgive. Forgive whom, actually? Who forgives whom? It would be up to the victims themselves to forgive or not forgive the butchers. But we are today the heirs of the victims or the heirs of the butchers. And the question of forgiveness cannot be asked today as such, in pure form.

On the other hand, this very difficulty can urge us to think about the meaning of forgiveness. Where does this value of the commandment to forgive come from? Is forgiveness possible? All these questions, that I tried to ask the other night, are constantly reawakened in us by the paramount reference to the Shoah. And it is not by chance that I spoke of it in my lecture in relation to Jankelevitch and to that example of the Shoah, which was not just one example among so many others. We might have chosen other examples. But this reference to the Shoah forces us in any case to ask ourselves what forgiveness means, if it is possible, if it is necessary, where it comes from, what is the culture that carries the notion of forgiveness, is there forgiveness in cultures where the Torah is not somehow the origin? These for me are questions, not only speculative questions, but truly the questions of the historical existence in which we are.

### Anglo-Analytical Philosophy and the Shoah

Q- Going back to the question of historicity and a-historicity. Why do you think has the Anglo-American philosophical sensibility chosen to bracket (off) history and historicity after the Holocaust? Do you think that the troubled and sometimes aggressively expressed reaction against your thought, against Deconstruction, has to do with this disagreement – since, strangely enough, deconstruction was often received as “a-historical”, “a-political”, etc.? Do you think that these are both relevant and perhaps necessary responses to the Holocaust – namely, bracketing history altogether, avoiding the very danger of politicizing spirit, or else engaging it once again, but then, with precaution, care, less pretense?

D- You know, it will take us more than a couple of minutes to deal with the problem of Anglo-American philosophy (of which in fact there are many) and of its relation to history and its distance from work like mine, for instance. It has never occurred to me, but I may have been wrong, that the resistance of a certain type of Anglo-American philosophy to some work such as mine had any direct or indirect relation to the Shoah. But, through a certain number of mediations, it is possible that you may be right. That is to say that, for

instance, we are reproached, or I am reproached with being too attentive to historicity, hence sometimes the reproach, altogether unjust, well, the reproach with relativism, historicism, etc. This is possible.

There is in fact in analytic philosophy, in any case in the dominant profile of analytic philosophy, one shouldn't simplify, there is an altogether spectacular distinction in the political history of Europe in this century, that's true. They philosophize as if nothing has happened. And so, there is perhaps in their resentment against deconstruction a certain bad conscience before a philosophy that asks the question of Europe, that asks the question of history, etc. Now it seems paradoxical that, as is sometimes the case, some of these Anglo-American philosophers accuse me, for example, or accuse what they call "deconstruction" of being a-historical, a-political. Since at the same time the opposite accusation is equally common, namely that deconstruction is a political radicalism, that it is too political. And there, in order to account for the incompatibility of these two accusations, it would be necessary, of course, to analyze the field very attentively. Which we cannot do now, very rapidly.

But, in any case, since you mention Anglo-American things, I think that, in the short time we have, at least two features should be emphasized. One has to do with its a-historical character or scant interest in history, political history and the political history of Europe among Anglo-Analytical philosophers. Not so much the philosophers who are in the United States, since there are after all many who are interested in continental philosophy. There are in the United States, as you know, a few centers, a few universities where they work very seriously, more seriously than anywhere else, I believe, on Husserl, Heidegger etc. But if we consider the greater part of the American philosophical territory, it is in fact dominated by what is called 'analytic philosophy', although it is currently in a somewhat critical phase. What stands out most often, even when there is interest in questions of morality, is a basic blanketing, as you were saying, a bracketing of all the events, all the traumas we're discussing right now. It must be emphasized that this philosophical disinterest or indifference (I do mean philosophical, in philosophical discourse,

because some individuals may as individuals be interested in the Holocaust, but they do not integrate this interest in the Holocaust into their philosophical discourse. So, it must be emphasized that disinterest) in the Holocaust often co-habits in American academic culture, probably for reasons of a bad conscience, with a prosecutorial attitude towards the least offence committed by European intellectuals, as the de Man or the Heidegger affairs have revealed, that is to say that the Americans, who were basically strangers to what happened in Europe, well, far away, American intellectuals and professors are often de-politicized, unlike many European intellectuals, they are shut up in their academic institutions, and they don't have any space for political intervention, and very often, all too they are not interested even in the politics of their own country: they concern themselves very little with racism in the United States, with economic deprivation, with the homeless, etc, but are in big rush to set up trials concerning literary fascism in France: the de Man affair, or Blanchot, etc. And I believe this should be seen as a sign of the bad conscience of abstract, powerless intellectuals often, how should I say it ,not too active in their own country. I am talking, naturally, of a typical generality. There are American academic intellectuals who are active or activist; but many of them, in any case those who set up those trials about de Man, are people who in their own country are totally blind and deaf to otherwise serious problems today. So, it would be necessary to reconstitute this scene, of which I'm only mentioning some schematic features.

### Auschwitz as a Proper Name

Q- Until now I have been asking questions as if Deconstruction, your philosophy of history and historicity, is indeed a response to Auschwitz. Is that so? Is it only Auschwitz? Is it a philosophy of a survivor? In what sense (“I could have been there” – the dream you recall in your autobiography)? Why have you avoided from using this proper name (you did use others, such as “shibboleth” and “circumcision”)?

D- First of all, deconstruction is not a philosophy of history. I don't know if you're taking this expression literally, but it is not a philosophy, and then the

concept of history is too problematic for me to say that deconstruction is a philosophy of history. It is not a philosophy of history. Your question was why I do not use the name Auschwitz? Were there other questions before?

Q- (repeating the questions)

D- I could try to demonstrate, but once more I can't do it here, not under these conditions, that the concept of survival occupies an altogether particular place in my work. There is a text entitled *Survivre*, and in it I try to note that surviving is neither life nor death, and I demonstrate in what a certain concept of survival resists, does not allow itself to be reduced to the opposition of life and death. And that the trace is always a survival, everything begins with survival, and thus, by the situation of inheritance and the relation to spectrality, the logic of the spectral which runs through all my work for at least twenty five years (*in La Carte Postale, Spectres de Marx* (11) ), the logic of the spectral implies another relation to the spirit of which we spoke little earlier, in the sense of the specter as Geist and ghost . It is the question of a logic of the phantom, of inheritance and thus of survival - we are in the domain of survival. The element in which all this discourse is inscribed is the element of survival.

Obviously, one needn't necessarily have in mind the survivors of Auschwitz in order to think of survival. In principle, logically, this discourse I hold about survival does not require a reference to the Shoah. But one would have to be blind and deaf not to see and hear, that each time survivors are mentioned today, this is what one thinks of. And naturally, I don't think of it any less than anyone else. But at the same time I insist on referring by this word or by this logic of survival to Auschwitz, but not only to Auschwitz, that is true. I want to note that this discourse could have been held in the 19th century, or even if Auschwitz never happened.

This, then, leads me to your question, why I did not name Auschwitz in this text (but I did name it elsewhere, ah well). It is because, as I've said in the beginning, I wouldn't like and I don't feel I have the right to give a single

proper name to all genocide, to all possible extermination, and even to the extermination of Jews under Nazism. Auschwitz, where I went a few weeks ago, Auschwitz is a place, it is terrible, Auschwitz, it is something monstrous, of course. But it was only, even during the experience of the extermination, a place among others. But why this metonymy? It is well known that when one says Auschwitz today, one doesn't think only of the town which still exists: there are still restaurants in Auschwitz, there is a very particular place.

I don't feel I have the right, both for reasons of rhetorical rigor and by respect for the victims, to use the name Auschwitz to designate any place where similar things have happened. It is a word often abused. People often use this word as a banner, a label: "At least I uttered the word Auschwitz, I've done my duty, my conscience is clear." I resist this easiness. For me, it is both too difficult and too easy. I don't use this word except in a serious manner, when I think it is necessary.

### 'Holocaust' as a Common Noun

Q- Interestingly enough, the notions of "catastrophe" and "holocaust" have appeared time and again in your writings – in *La Carte Postale, Glas, Feu, La Cendre*, etc. But then, with small letters! You emphasize so strongly and delicately the significance of idiomacy, but you seem to have generalized these somewhat heavily loaded terms. Why so?

D- You've said all this very well. But what is the question. You've said very well what needed to be said and what could be developed. I don't see the question which I could try to answer now.

Q- From my own point of view, as an Israeli, this gesture seems to resemble that of revisionism. I'm aware that it might sound too severe. Nevertheless, by generalizing, one creates analogies. This is the very problem we are confronted with: how to speak about the Holocaust without trivializing, homogenizing, etc.? How to communicate the horrific? Does generalizing imply forgiveness?

D- Holocaust depends on the context, of course. It is a common name. 'Holocaust' in Greek means 'the burning of everything'. I called the word 'brule tout' in French, which is a synonym of 'holocaust' (in *La Carte Postale*); 'burn everything', 'burn all', that's what 'holocaust' means. 'Holocaust' is sometimes used to translate the Hebrew word for 'sacrifice,' for burning, etc. So it's a common name. So I try sometimes to speak of a holocaust that consists, for instance, of burning some love letters, 'burn all'. Why would it this be forbidden, to...?

Q- It is not forbidden, naturally, but I do find it disturbing, offensive.

D- Naturally, I know what I'm doing when I say, for instance, in *La Carte Postale*, that one must practice the holocaust of this or that, that one is to burn and so on. I am after all a man of my time and I know of course what the resonances are. And I believe that today one cannot burn anything at all, not even a love letter, without thinking about the great Holocaust of this era, not only the gas chambers and the crematoria, but also the burned books, in the beginning of Hitlerism, when they threw all of Freud's or Kafka's books and burned them in the public square, this too belonged to the order of holocaust. That is to say, they burned it all. When I use the word 'holocaust' I use it as a common noun, but with at least a lateral or elliptical reference in my ear or in my mind to the Holocaust of which we've been speaking this morning or the Shoah. But is this wrong? Am I to be charged for using the word 'holocaust' as a common name? Do you think that using the word 'holocaust' in that context to refer to burning postcards or love letters was indecent?

Q- I do.

D- Yes, we have to think about that.

We touch upon a problem, which I perceive in several philosophies after Auschwitz, namely, transforming all-too-particular historical constraints into

quasi-transcendental categories, which constitute then the conditions of possibility of subjectivity. Furthermore, these categories point at the idea of perfectibility, of a better humanity. In other words, it seems to me that both Levinas and yourself have transformed several specific traumas and obsessions, caused by the Holocaust, into a descriptive given of experience, and through this very a-priorism, glorified several pathologies, de-aestheticized them, made them “the ethical”: One should, always already, mourn; one should, always already, forgive, etc.

D- This is something that always happens, all the time. As soon as you've tried to speak of choice, for example, each word you'll use to talk about this, to talk about this unique thing, each word will be one taken from general language, a common noun that will re-inscribe you within a common language, that will therefore re-inscribe the Shoah within a common language. The question you've asked me may be asked and indeed you have asked it of Lévinas. Suppose we say that the Shoah has been a major trauma, unmatched, unique in the history of mankind. It is the wound of our time, the wound of our consciousness, of our memory. If we use the word 'trauma' to mean within a certain generality that a trauma occurred and that, for instance, the moral relation to the other passes, as Lévinas says, through a certain trauma, would you then reproach Lévinas with using the word 'trauma' when he ought to have reserved it for the Shoah? Are you going to reproach him with making trauma and wound, with making vulnerability into the very condition of morality, the transcendental - in any case, the general - condition of morality? It is certain that when Lévinas himself says 'trauma', 'persecution', 'hostage', 'haunting', he thinks, naturally, of the Shoah, this is indisputable. But he would say this in the same way even had there been no Shoah. The Shoah also helps us think morality and crime; but I don't think one has the right to suspect or forbid anyone the use of these words because these words are valid par excellence for designating the Shoah. Otherwise one couldn't speak of anything at all. And I believe that, on the contrary, out of respect for the Shoah, it is a way of re-thinking ethics, politics, philosophical discourse on the basis of categories that seem to us most appropriate to the Shoah. For



example, the categories of traumas, of persecutions, well, of the "Thou shalt not kill." When Lévinas says "Thou shalt not kill," he thinks of the Shoah. But he has no need of the Shoah for this either. Here, it is always the same situation we've been talking about from the start. We can perhaps stop here. All right... But this will be the last. It's too much. It's too little, but too much.

## Deconstruction and the Repression of Violence

Q- Coming now to the warm welcome you have just received in Israel. Some time ago, there was held, for the first time in Jerusalem, a conference on Hannah Arendt, confronting her ideas about the Holocaust and the Eichmann trial. Do you think that this openness, addressed to a thinker which was marginalized for so long, is connected somewhat with the response addressed to you ?

D- Even if it's true, do you think it has to do with Yad Vashem? No... When I say 'Yad Vashem' I mean the problems we're addressing now. You think there is a relation between... We don't have to speak in this interview of anything else than, I think... Unless there is a connection, in your question... Well, go on...

Q- The conference I was just referring to constitutes an element within a wider trend, perhaps a necessary phase, in the Israeli public's self-reflection. The Israel Museum has been willing, in the last couple of months, to show an exhibition, performed by a young artist, R. Rosen, in which the viewer was expected to get close to Eva Braun's sensibility as Hitler's lover. It created a whole controversy, naturally, since it meant confronting one's fascination or implication within violence, within evil.

D- Are you telling me now that just as there is some interest now in the persecutors as well as in those persecuted, like Eva Braun, following a certain evolution, it is possible to be interested in me?! At the time when it finally becomes possible to speak of Eva Braun, I am being accepted?! No, it's a joke, I'm kidding, it's a joke.

I think that as we were saying a little while ago of French culture, Israeli culture has its own evolutionary time. And it has registered in its conscience and consciousness or unconscious all sorts of violence. Obviously, the violence of the Shoah, which was very close at the moment of the founding of the State of Israel, and which has prevented things which appeared too offensive or too threatening from coming to the public arena or to public conscience, consciousness or reference (even Spinoza could not be spoken of in the early days of the State of Israel). And then, little by little, Hanna Arendt's attitude during the Eichmann trial was such that Hanna Arendt was rejected. And then, little by little, here, like in France, what was repressed could be liberated, the political situation changes, and I believe that today, in fact, Israel can speak more easily than before of the things it associates with Nazi violence, or with violence against the Jews in general, from German things to Spinoza etc. (who was, so to speak, excommunicated, in any case, excluded.)

But it can equally, at the same moment, take cognizance of its own violence, that is to say the violence that accompanied the founding of the State of Israel. This could not be discussed too soon afterwards; but with the passing of generations and the evolution of the political field, there are repressions and suppressions that are lifted. And so it becomes possible, once more, or rather for the first time, to be interested in people, in thoughts, in discourses that were previously hidden. Such is the case of Hanna Arendt, for example.

I wouldn't want to compare my situation to any of those you have mentioned, all these great names from Spinoza to Eva Braun to Hanna Arendt. Still, I think that my work has often been associated here with a somewhat caricatural image of deconstruction, a little bit as everywhere in the world, often, to Heidegger and Nietzsche, to German thought, to a somewhat oversophisticated French thought. And then, it is also true, besides this general change in Israeli culture, besides this general shift, in the academic departments of philosophy there has been the Anglo-Analytical domination we spoke of earlier, which has not totally disappeared but has been losing

ground, moving a little. There is a certain American hegemony in Israeli academic philosophical culture (since what is true in philosophy is not necessarily true in the other disciplines, but in philosophy there has been a privileging of American philosophy). It is in the process of changing slowly, little by little the terrain is being reshaped, undergoes change. I have noticed, and I'm not the only one, my friends too have noticed a great difference between the relation to my work twenty years ago, then ten years ago and today, it has been changing a great deal. I believe that this may be explained not only by the fact that some people have been reading me, but by a certain general transformation of the Israeli cultural field.

This transformation of Israeli general culture, to return to our subject, is related to at least two major types of violence that up till now have been repressed, so to speak, dissimulated, on the one hand for the obvious reasons of the violence of the Shoah and because of the fact that the Shoah had been one of the justifications for the formation of the State of Israel. Everything that had threatened, persecuted, tortured, battered, exterminated the Jews became, how shall we say, unacceptable. On the one hand there was repression of the violence against the Jews before or during the war. And the other violence, that's the founding of the State of Israel, which was (as I recalled the other night in Tel Aviv) like the founding of any state, but to a very particular extent for the Israelis, a great violence towards the Palestinians, also internal violence. The formation of the State of Israel is an event that has somehow not come to an end and which is also very violent. And it is with regard to this fundamental, founding violence that memory has been shifting.

With regard to these two violences, there was during let's say the 50's, the 70's, the 80's a repression, a repressive expulsion, so to speak, which like any repression in psychoanalytic terms is also a labor of mourning. And today things are changing, and it is possible once again, as you've recalled, to speak of certain Germans, of the butchers, it is possible to speak of them; but on the other hand, it is also possible, to speak of Israeli violence, I don't want to compare, but finally these are two cases of violence. And then we may

speak of a certain discourse, which until then was directly or indirectly held to be incomprehensible, or not necessary, or threatening. Deconstruction, unfortunately, is often considered to be threatening, not only in Israel, but elsewhere as well. So we should try to account for this, we must try to explain why deconstruction is felt to be threatening. But that is another subject. Thank you.

Q- Thank You

Notes:

- 1) Backlanted passages originally uttered in English.
- 2) For several discussions on the question of the signature and of the proper name see, e.g. *The Ear of the Other*, tr. P. Kamuf and others (New York: Schocken, 1985); *Cinders*, trans. N. Lukacher (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991); *Memoires: for Paul de Man*, trans. C. Lindsay, J. Culler, and E. Cadava (Columbia University Press), 1986; "Aphorism Countertime" in D. Attridge (ed.) *Acts of Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992). An intense discussion on the question of the date is elaborated in an essay dedicated to Paul Celan, "'Schibboleth': for Paul Celan in G. Hartman and S. Budick, Eds. *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).
- 3) *Glas*, trans. J.P. Leavey, Jr and R. Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).
- 4) *The Post card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. A. Baas (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1987).
- 5) *Circumfession*, trans. G. Bennington (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- 6) See *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Religion and Postmodernism), trans. Eric Prenowitz, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- 7) *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby (University of Chicago Press, 1989).
- 8) *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. P-A Brault and M.B. Naas (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991).

- 9) Derrida relates to issues surrounding Heidegger's political ontology in several major texts, such as "Heidegger's Ear: philopolemology (*Geschlecht IV*), trans. J.P. Leavey, Jr, in ed. J. Sallis, *Reading Heidegger: commemorations* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993): 163-218; "Geschlecht II: Heidegger's Hand", trans. J.P. Leavey, in J. Sallis, ed. *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987): 161-196.
- 10) *Like the Sound of the Sea Deep Within a Shell: Paul de Man's War*, trans. P. Kamuf, in *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*, eds. W. Hamacher, N. Hertz, T. Keenan (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989): 127-164.
- 11) *Specters of Marx*, trans. P. Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).

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