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Of Ghosts and Angels: Derrida, Kushner, and the Impossibility of Forgiveness

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OF GHOSTS AND ANGELS:
DERRIDA, KUSHNER, AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF FORGIVENESS

"Forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable."
Jacques Derrida¹

It isn't easy, it doesn't count if it's easy, it's the hardest thing. Forgiveness."
Tony Kushner²

Preparation for a Dream

In a number of essays and lectures written toward the end of his life, Jacques Derrida sets forth the controversial proposition that forgiveness can only forgive that which cannot be forgiven. If a transgression is said to be "forgivable," he explains, then it might call for forgetting, restitution, and/or reconciliation, but it would not call for forgiveness. Absurdly, the only crime that would truly call for forgiveness would be the *unforgivable*—that which could never be understood, forgotten, or undone: "If one is only prepared to forgive what the church calls 'venial sin,' then the very idea of forgiveness would disappear. If there is something to forgive, it would be what in religious language is called mortal sin, the worst, the unforgivable crime or harm. From which comes the aporia, which can be described in its dry and implacable formality, without mercy: forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable. One cannot, or one should not, forgive; there is only forgiveness, if there is any, where there is the unforgivable."³ Insofar as only that which could never be forgiven could be forgiven, Derrida teaches us that the very possibility of forgiveness lies in its impossibility. Forgiveness of the unforgivable "does not exist as possible, it only exists by exempting itself from the law of the possible, by impossibilizing itself, so to speak, and in the infinite endurance of the impossible as impossible."⁴ And yet, forgiveness *seems* to happen—or at the very least, to be offered, denied, and requested—all the time, and without provoking the aporetic agony that the infinite endurance of the impossibility of the possible *as* impossible should

¹ Jacques Derrida, "On Forgiveness," trans. Michael Hughes, in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 32.

² Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993), act 5, scene 3, p. 122. This text will be hereafter abbreviated *Angels II*.

³ Derrida, "On Forgiveness," 32-3.

⁴ Derrida, "To Forgive: The Unforgivable and the Imprescriptible," trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg, in *Questioning God*, ed. John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 48.

doubtless provoke. In fact, Derrida's work on this particular concept is primarily a response to a veritable explosion since 1945 of "scenes of repentance, confession, forgiveness, or apology" in which, with increasing regularity, "one sees not only individuals, but also entire communities, professional corporations, the representatives of ecclesiastical hierarchies, sovereigns, and heads of state ask for 'forgiveness.'"⁵ Among other examples of such "scenes," Derrida mentions the great amnesty of 1951 in France, the Japanese Prime Minister's public apology to the people of South Korea and China, the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions of Chile and of South Africa, Bill Clinton's mass-pardoning of imprisoned Puerto Ricans as he left the White House in 2000, and Pope John Paul II's (rather delayed) apology for the Roman Catholic Church's silence/complicity in the face of the Nazi atrocities.⁶ While Derrida acknowledges the importance of many such gestures, he notes that in each of these cases, pardon is sought or granted for the sake of some sort of political gain, so that all too often, "all sorts of unacknowledgeable 'politics,' all sorts of strategic ruses can hide themselves abusively behind a 'rhetoric' or a 'comedy' of forgiveness."⁷ To be sure, there are more and less selfish, more and less hypocritical examples of such transactions, but precisely in this recent proliferation of hyper-publicized scenes of "forgiveness," the meaning of forgiveness itself seems to have been lost.

Derrida thus endeavors to analyze "forgiveness itself," finding two distinct strands within the Abrahamic tradition's understanding of this concept—two different logics which remain "irreconcilable but indissociable."⁸ On the one hand, "the heritage" presents us with the notion of a "conditional" forgiveness, which would grant pardon to those who confess, repent, and/or perform some sort of penance for the sake of reconciliation. On the other hand, however, the same philo-theo-literary canon presents us with the notion of an "unconditional" forgiveness—one that would forgive even the unapologetic and unreformed. Something like the former strand, which Derrida characterizes as "economic," has arguably motivated the recent surge of public calls to and for forgiveness, because in each of these cases, forgiveness is only given in return for something else. For example, under the direction of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa granted amnesty to apartheid criminals on the condition that the applicants provide a full disclosure of the crimes they had committed and witnessed. Again, Derrida commends the project—however "Christianized"—of public reconciliation, but notes that it ultimately functions not for the sake of forgiveness itself, but for the formation and preservation of the nation. Understood conditionally or economically, "forgiveness" oils the Hegelian mechanisms of History, which of course operate entirely by means of reconciliation. *Aufhebung* relies upon the very traumas it works to forget, opening and healing political and interpersonal wounds in order

⁵ Derrida, "On Forgiveness," 28.

⁶ See Derrida, "On Forgiveness," 30-1, 40, 47; and "To Forgive," 25, 34.

⁷ Derrida, "On Forgiveness," 50.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

to bring about the sublated nation-state.⁹ Furthermore, conditional forgiveness ensures unity within the state by reinscribing the sovereignty of the sovereign. Derrida reminds us that traditionally, the right to pardon is reserved for the king who, *in imitatio dei*, bestows forgiveness upon a criminal once she has properly debased herself through one or another combination of penance and repentance. What Derrida pinpoints as “aporetic” about this is that in the process of stabilizing the specular economy that maintains the integrity of history and sovereignty, conditional forgiveness actually becomes inimical to forgiveness.

How does this happen? Reduced to its simplest state, conditional forgiveness would take place between one apologetic criminal and one victim, who would have the “right” to grant or not grant the criminal pardon. Immediately, then, this sort of thinking is unable to account for the overwhelming majority of concrete socio-political scenarios, in which the victim or the criminal is an entire nation, community, or family, or in which some or all of the parties involved are dead. Who would have the right to forgive on behalf of the victims of murder, war, or genocide (or to apologize on behalf of their perpetrators)? Anyone who took such a responsibility upon himself could only do so by asserting some “divine” right to vicarious forgiveness. What is troubling, moreover, is that this hierarchical positioning is actually recapitulated in every instance of conditional forgiveness. For even if the victim is both singular and alive, and even if she decides to consider forgiving her “own” criminal on the condition that he apologize and/or reform himself, she is effectively exalted over the debased figure she pardons, precisely by virtue of her power to bestow or withhold forgiveness in accordance with the degree of the criminal’s self-abasement. A further complication of this conditional scene is that the *reformed* criminal—the “new person”—upon whom the sovereign victim might confer forgiveness, would no longer be the person who committed the crime. Derrida thus argues that “what makes the ‘I forgive you’ sometimes unbearable or odious, even obscene, is the affirmation of sovereignty,”¹⁰ A strictly conditional “forgiveness,” even if it were possible, would merely reverse and repeat the original violence: exalting the victim to the extent that the criminal would be laid-low, and ultimately annulling the “victim” as such, the “criminal” as such, and forgiveness itself.

“Forgiveness itself” must therefore be something other than the transactions to which it is typically reduced—something like the unconditionality that always plays the “other hand” to conditional forgiveness’s “one hand.” If conditional forgiveness functions economically, unconditional forgiveness would operate

⁹ See G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Leo Rauch (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988). The idea that “History” works to *obliterate* the tension that propels it is not one that Derrida attributes so much to Hegel as to a certain Hegelianism—one that happens to drive the popular, progressivist imagination as well as modern “globalatinized” statecraft. Getting at this particular specter of Hegel is Derrida’s (and Kushner’s) concern here; offering a careful alternative to the Kierkegaardian-Kojévian understanding of Hegelian difference is not.

¹⁰ Derrida, “On Forgiveness,” 58.

aneconomically; that is, it would not be offered in exchange for anything. Unconditional forgiveness would be given without requiring any apology, promise, or hope of reconciliation. In such a scene, the criminal would remain the criminal, the victim would remain the victim, the crime would remain unforgettable, and somehow, forgiveness would still take place. Unconditional forgiveness would thus disrupt the specular economy that conditional forgiveness can only reaffirm. Far from permitting the healing of wounds and oblivion of traumas that ensure history's relentless continuity, unconditional forgiveness would *disrupt* the reciprocal violence of the normal course of things. It is this *Aufhebung*-inhibiting "other hand" that Derrida designates as "genuine," or "pure" forgiveness: "I shall risk this proposition: each time forgiveness is at the service of a finality, be it noble and spiritual (atonement or redemption, reconciliation, salvation), each time that it aims to re-establish a normality (social, national, political, psychological) by a work of mourning, by some therapy or ecology of memory, then the 'forgiveness' is not pure—nor is its concept. Forgiveness is not, it *should not be*, normal, normative, normalizing. It *should* remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible: as if it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality."¹¹ "...Prepare for the parting of the air,/ The breath, the ascent,/ Glory to..."¹²

In his conviction that genuine forgiveness would unsettle history rather than send it safely on its teleological way, Derrida echoes Hannah Arendt, who argues in *The Human Condition* that forgiveness would be a surprise "interference" into the violence and counter-violence of the everyday, an interruption of the "relentless automatism" of provocation and revenge that propels the normal course of history. "Forgiving," she suggests, "is the only reaction which does not merely re-act, but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven."¹³ While Derrida does not acknowledge this particular debt to Arendt, he does engage her work on forgiveness, along with that of Vladimir Jankélévitch, in order to distinguish his position from theirs with respect to the question of sovereignty. For Derrida, both Arendt and Jankélévitch (at least in his later work¹⁴) believe that forgiveness is a human

¹¹ Ibid., 32.

¹² Tony Kushner, *Angels in America Part One: Millennium Approaches* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993), act 2, scene 5, p. 62. This text will hereafter be abbreviated *Angels I*.

¹³ Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 241.

¹⁴ Derrida notes a profound shift in Jankélévitch's thought between his two major works on the question of forgiveness. In *Le pardon* (1967), Jankélévitch argues that the logic of forgiveness exceeds the logic of punishment, and can take place even when a crime exceeds the possibility of expiation. In *L'imprescriptible* (1971), however, in which he treats the question of whether or not "we" should forgive the German people for the unforgivable crimes of National Socialism, Jankélévitch contradicts the argument set forth in his earlier book, calling it "purely philosophical," and insists that forgiveness *must not* be extended to the German people for two reasons: because they have not repented and the crime was and remains too awful to be forgiven. See Derrida, "To Forgive," 25-45; see also Jankélévitch, *Le pardon* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1967); and

power; that it is something a particularly strong or noble subject or head of State can *do* when she or he sees fit. If forgiveness were a power, however, if an “I” could do it, then it would reinscribe the forgiver as *magister* over the forgiven. Faced again with the problem of sovereignty and reciprocal violence, Derrida insists once more that unconditional forgiveness must come as a surprise—precisely there where “I” *cannot forgive*.

At the end of “On Forgiveness,” Derrida does not go so far as to describe such a scene of genuinely unconditional forgiveness. Rather, he *heralds* it: “What I dream of, what I try to think as the ‘purity’ of a forgiveness worthy of its name, would be a forgiveness without power: *unconditional but without sovereignty*. The most difficult task, at once necessary and apparently impossible, would be to dissociate *unconditionality* and *sovereignty*. Will that be done one day? It is not around the corner, as is said. But since the hypothesis of this unrepresentable task announces itself, be it as a dream for thought, this madness is perhaps not so mad....”¹⁵ What follows, then, is an attempt to walk awhile through a Derridean dream: to catch a glimpse of some momentary interruption of the possible, and of the powerful, in the mad instant of forgiveness.

II. The Nightmare of “Reciprocal Fascination”

As the possibility of the impossible, Derrida suggests that forgiveness is the stuff of dreams, slipping out of every waking attempt to hammer it out conceptually. Thus we have already stumbled upon a considerable impediment to any effort to grasp this subject matter philosophically. Derrida admits, “Every time I make a theoretical statement about the event of forgiveness I am sure that I miss it.”¹⁶ To say that thinking will always fall short of forgiveness is not to say, however, that it should stop trying. Arguably, the closest Derrida himself ever came to incarnating his “dream for thought” in a concrete example was the hypothetical scene he offered during the last meeting of a seminar he taught with Avital Ronell at New York University in October, 2001.¹⁷ Having spent the preceding three weeks carefully outlining the aporetics of forgiveness by means of careful readings of Arendt, Jankélévitch, Augustine, Shakespeare, the Hebrew Bible, and the New Testament, Derrida finally offered his audience a sketch of what he called an “authentic scene of forgiveness.” Pure, unconditional forgiveness,

L'imprescriptible: Pardonner? Dans l'honneur et la dignité (Paris: Seuil, 1986). *Le pardon* has been translated as *Forgiveness* by Andrew Kelley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and two essays from “*L'imprescriptible*” can be found translated as “Should We Pardon Them?” and “Do Not Listen to What They Say, Look At What They Do” by Ann Hobart in *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 1996): 549-572.

¹⁵ Derrida, “On Forgiveness,” 59-60.

¹⁶ Derrida, “On Forgiveness: A Roundtable Discussion with Jacques Derrida,” moderated by Richard Kearney, in *Questioning God*, 53. To avoid confusion with the essay in the *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* volume, this piece will henceforth be abbreviated “Roundtable.”

¹⁷ The proceedings of this seminar, which ran during the fall term of 2001, have not been published.

Derrida suggested, would look something like this: one criminal would continually commit the same crime against one victim, and the victim would continually forgive him, knowing he would never apologize and never change. In such a scene, Derrida explained, there could be no possibility of forgetting or of reconciliation; rather, the two parties would exist in a perpetual and “reciprocal fascination” with one another, the criminal remaining the criminal and the victim remaining the victim by virtue of their constant and identical repetition of the original violence. This would be the “purest” instance of forgiveness, an inescapable reciprocal bind from which the victim would cry, “you’re killing me and I forgive you.”

To be sure, it would not be a philosophically rigorous move to say at this point that this particular reader, incalculably indebted as she is to Derrida’s texts and lectures, finds this scene of “reciprocal fascination” nothing short of monstrous. Nor would it be fair, as she might be strongly tempted to do, merely to point out the uncanny resemblance of such “forgiveness” to the most atrocious situations of domestic violence, and then reject the vision on feminist-ethical grounds. Nor would it be helpful were she to trans-value this scene into incontrovertible proof of forgiveness’s elision of all conceptual frameworks, offer some song of praise to Transcendence, and then move on. A far more responsible way to proceed at this very difficult juncture would be for her to demonstrate, as she has come to believe, that Derrida’s attempted instantiation of his “dream for thought” does not meet the theoretical criteria of his own analysis of forgiveness.

From our initial sketch of Derrida’s understanding of the paradoxical logic of forgiveness, we will recall three primary characteristics of forgiveness, all of which make forgiveness possible only as impossible. First, forgiveness can only forgive the unforgivable. Second, it must interrupt, rather than reaffirm, the ordinary course of history. Third, it must unsettle, rather than bolster, the subject-as-sovereign. Insofar as it gives us a criminal who remains a criminal, a crime that remains unforgettable, and a “relation” that could never be reconciled, Derrida’s identically repeated violence fulfills the first of these criteria: the crime it thematizes is unforgivable. It does not, however, fulfill the other two. For while this “reciprocal fascination,” as unforgivable, certainly would not heal memories and send history on its merry way, it would not *disrupt* it, either; in fact, it would trap history in a relentless circularity more difference-denying even than the most flat-footed renditions of “Hegelian” teleology. Moreover, far from divesting the forgiver of power and self-identity, such a scenario would make a super-sovereign of the one victim who, in martyrological or even Christic fashion, would keep forgiving her one unrepentant (and reciprocally self-identical) criminal. In such a situation, the more humiliated the victim were to become, the more exalted she would become by virtue of her perverse ability to forgive incessantly even the most perverse, incessant crime.

It has already been mentioned that in his two major essays on forgiveness, Derrida locates a double-bind at the very heart of the concept “we” have inherited. In both of these pieces, Derrida is careful to emphasize the structural *dependence* of conditionality and unconditionality upon one another—an

indissociability that nevertheless does not annul their radical heterogeneity. Therein lies the aporia. Logically speaking, thinking cannot resolve this aporia by resting either with conditionality *or* with unconditionality, for

if our idea of forgiveness falls into ruin as soon as it is deprived of its pole of absolute reference, namely its unconditional purity, it remains nonetheless inseparable from what is heterogeneous to it, namely the order of conditions, repentance, transformation, as many things as allow it to inscribe itself in history, law, politics, existence itself. These two poles, *the unconditional and the conditional*, are absolutely heterogeneous, and must remain irreducible to one another. They are nonetheless indissociable: if one wants, and it is necessary, forgiveness to become effective, concrete, historic; if one wants it to *arrive*, to happen by changing things, it is necessary that this purity engage itself in a series of conditions of all kinds (psycho-sociological, political, etc.). It is between these two poles, *irreconcilable but indissociable*, that decisions and responsibilities are to be taken.¹⁸

What this means is that while one needs some notion of “pure” forgiveness in order to keep one’s ordinary understanding of the concept open to revision and improvement, there *is* no “pure forgiveness itself” – no Form of forgiveness hanging out in the philosophical stratosphere. Unconditional forgiveness cannot *exist* without the conditions that invariably corrupt it, conditions which in turn give rise to the unconditional as that which transgresses each of their limits and laws. The conditional and unconditional require one another because neither of them can be itself – that is, forgiveness – without the other: the conditional-alone falls into agonistic economy as quickly as the unconditional-alone falls into useless abstraction. So even if Derrida’s scene of “reciprocal fascination” *did* embody forgiveness-itself, it would confirm the inextricability of this strand with the “other” one, for it demonstrates that “pure” forgiveness of the unforgivable falls into ethical ruin just as surely as amnesty granted in return for political favors. Far from being “pure,” then, a scene in which forgiveness might actually take place would have to be ethically syncretic, staging what Derrida would call a “negotiation” between the conditional and the unconditional.¹⁹ Forgiveness’s sudden interruption of onto-temporal identity could only be provoked by a dynamic, stubbornly *impure* in-betweenness.

III. Ghostly Disturbances

As we continue to think through the (im)possibility of forgiveness as specular interference, I would suggest that the most productive place in Derrida’s “own”

¹⁸ Derrida, “On Forgiveness,” 44-5.

¹⁹ See “Roundtable,” 58; c.f. his similar analyses of democracy and hospitality in *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 86-87 [142-43] and *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 112. Page numbers for the French text of *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993) appear in square brackets after the English page numbers.

corpus to gather the resources for such an endeavor is his work on haunting. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida reminds us that classical ontology is constituted dialectically, drawing the boundaries of is-ness itself by drawing definitive distinctions between being and non-being, presence and absence, me and you, the living and the dead, here and there, now and then, etc. Looking to unsettle the monadic understanding of identity that emerges from the mutual exclusion of these pairs (I am me by virtue of my not being you; my people are mine by virtue of their being the ones *here* rather than there; and so on), Derrida locates in the pseudo-logic of *haunting* a certain anteriority to, and perpetual exceeding of, the onto-logic of binary opposition. Something that haunts me unsettles all the self-identical products of ontology, because a ghost—whether it be mine or another’s—neither is nor is not, is neither simply present nor simply absent, neither me nor someone entirely different from me, neither living nor properly dead, neither fully here nor fully there, and arrives as a then (whether past, futural, or mythic) that takes place in the midst of the now. In Derrida’s words, “*hauntologie*” precedes the *ontologie* it both conditions and disrupts. We can thus say that the entirety of the philosophical, literary, and theological heritage—the inheritance by virtue of which all of “our” thought and speech and writing is possible in the first place—is *haunted*.

One part of the canon in which Derrida can detect particularly loud chain-rattling is the work of Karl Marx, who of course announces communism itself as a ghost in the opening words of the *Manifesto*: “a specter [*Gespenst, spectre*] is haunting Europe—the specter of communism.”²⁰ In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida traces the references to ghosts and specters throughout Marx’s work, and finds that, like all properly atheist rationalist late-Enlightenment thinkers, Marx is terrified of ghosts, a fear that is particularly noticeable in his repeated disavowal of Stirner’s exclamation, “*Ja, es spukt in der ganzen Welt,*” which roughly translates as, “indeed, the whole world is haunted.”²¹ Marx judges such a belief to be absurd, but as Derrida notes, the extraordinary amount of energy Marx expends in trying to excise ghosts ends up provoking their strengthened return (for example, in the opening words of his most important work). Derrida encapsulates this self-sabotaging sort of disavowal in the word *conjurer* which, in French more powerfully than in English, means at once to invite and to ward off, or arrest. He sees such conjuring most problematically performed today not on the part of Marx’s heirs—if there are any left—but rather in liberal market democracy’s having appointed itself the only remaining political philosophy on

²⁰ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Second Edition, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978), 473. Cited in Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 4 [22].

²¹ See *Ibid.*, 135f [216f]. Derrida’s version reads “Oui, le monde tout entière est peuplé de fantômes,” and the translation of Marx Kamuf cites is, “Yes, ghosts are teeming in the whole world.” A shortcoming of both of these versions is that they re-introduce the very subject that the *es spukt* eludes, prompting Derrida to say that “translations are obliged to circumvent” this little phrase, which he renders variously as “it haunts, it ghosts, it specters [*ça hante, ça revenante, ça spectre*].” Kamuf also translates *ça hante* as “it spooks.”

the planet, a move that Derrida reads as an effort to deny audience to any and all ghosts of Marxism: to make sure that the dead creature stays put in its socio-political coffin.²² Like all ghosts worth their salt, however, these specters are most insistent where they are least welcome, and in trying to fight off some of them (for example, the phantoms of labor rights, equality, and the redistribution of wealth and goods), modern capitalism has actually invoked—and remade itself in the image of—the more totalitarian specters of Marx.

An ethic, at once political and hermeneutical, thus emerges from Derrida's analysis. Like Horatio, whom Hamlet entreats to speak to his father's spirit because he is "a Scholler," thinking must come to terms with, "learn to live with," ghosts.²³ This does not mean accepting uncritically the message of every apparition; rather, it entreats us to listen carefully to them and to decide which, at any particular juncture, we will respond to—which ones we will *inherit*. For our very being is inheritance. But, as Derrida explains in an interview, "to inherit is not essentially *to receive* something, a *given* that one could then *have*. It is an active affirmation." In order even to be, one must decide how and what to inherit, and so "One makes selections, one filters, one sifts through the ghosts or through the injunctions of each spirit."²⁴ It is this continual, continually changing inheritance—this ceaseless channeling of some spirits rather than others—that makes me who I am. Being is thus "auto-immune," only becoming itself by letting something other than itself constitute itself. Insofar as it does the work of inheritance, then, identity-as-auto-immune is *haunted*: "I am would mean I am haunted...Wherever there is Ego, *es spukt*."²⁵

This particular (and doubtless inadvertent) Marxian sending captures Derrida's imagination because it does not attribute the haunting to any particular agent: the state of things is simply *es spukt*, "*ça hante*," "it spooks." This locution thus reformulates Heidegger's *es gibt*, allowing Derrida to suggest that the basic unit of the *il y a* is not so much *être-donné* as it is *être-hanté*. I am—we are—as haunted. Haunted by ancestors, by dead friends and enemies, by living friends and enemies, by one or another utopian dream, by the entirety of "the heritage"—haunted to such an extent that I am only I insofar as I am not just or not quite "I"; just as we are only we as more or less than "we"; and as that "now" and "then" are only themselves as shot through with ghosts of the past, the present, and the yet-to-come. If, then, we are to find a scene in which the self-identical mechanisms of history and sovereignty are even momentarily unsettled by the surprise-event of forgiveness, we would do well to listen out for ghosts.

²² See Derrida's brilliant, uncharacteristically searing critique of Francis Fukuyama in *ibid.*, 56f [97f].

²³ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 1, scene 1, line 45; *Specters of Marx*, xviii [15]; emphasis on "with" omitted.

²⁴ Derrida, "The Deconstruction of Actuality," in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews 1971-2001* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 110-1.

²⁵ *Specters of Marx*, 133 [212].

IV. Angelic Interruptions

Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* opens with the funeral of the grandmother of an overeducated, underachieving, gay Jewish 30-something New Yorker named Louis. In his sermon, the rabbi tells the gathered mourners that the great journey their ancestors made from Eastern Europe to America is inscribed upon each of them—that their very lives are an inheritance and repetition of that journey. "...this being-with specters would also be a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations...."²⁶ In the second act, Roy Cohn²⁷ will tell his protégé Joe²⁸ that "the most precious asset in life, I think, is the ability to be a good son," mapping Joe's debt to him onto his own indebtedness to "Walter Winchell, Edgar Hoover. Joe McCarthy most of all."²⁹ With this proclamation, Roy announces a theme that haunts the entirety of this play: the problem of "sifting through" the spirits that haunt us—of being faithful or unfaithful to what one has inherited, welcoming or rejecting ghosts, heeding or rejecting the message of angels.

"...The living ego is auto-immune...to protect its life...it is necessarily led to welcome the other within...."³⁰ A crisis of auto-immunity provides the setting for the haunted hospitality of *Angels*, which takes place in 1985, at the height (or the first height) of the AIDS epidemic in the United States. After the funeral service, Louis's partner Prior pulls his collar aside to reveal an advanced lesion on his chest, which he had not wanted to show Louis for fear that he'd leave him. Completely unable to handle the revelation, Louis runs to the cemetery "to bury [his] grandma,"³¹ and finds the rabbi, from whom he proceeds to seek something like preemptive absolution. Louis tells the rabbi he had "abandoned" his grandmother for years before she died; that he was and is what Roy Cohn would call "a bad son." Then, masking a question about his sick partner with a question about his sick grandmother, he asks,

Louis: Rabbi, what does the Holy Writ say about someone who abandons someone he loves at a time of great need?

Rabbi: Why would a person do such a thing?

Louis: Because he has to. Maybe a person who has this neo-Hegelian positivist sense of constant historical progress towards happiness or perfection or something, who feels very powerful

²⁶ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xix [15], emphasis on "politics" omitted.

²⁷ The Roy Cohn: infamous defense attorney and chief counsel to Senator Joseph McCarthy in the early 1950's. Among other crimes, Cohn was instrumental in the State's execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg on June 19, 1953.

²⁸ Joe Pitt, a (fictional) closeted Mormon lawyer to whom Cohn has taken a strong liking, and whose wife Harper spends most of the play in one or another valium-induced fantasy.

²⁹ Kushner, *Angels I*, act 2, scene 4, p. 56.

³⁰ Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*, 141 [224].

³¹ Kushner, *Angels I*, act 1, scene 4, p. 22.

because he feels connected to these forces...maybe that person can't, um, incorporate sickness into his sense of how things are supposed to go. Maybe vomit...and sores and disease...really frighten him, maybe...he isn't so good with death.

Rabbi: The Holy Scriptures have nothing to say about such a person.

Louis: Rabbi, I'm afraid of the crimes I may commit.

Rabbi: Please, mister, I'm a sick old rabbi facing a long drive home to the Bronx. You want to confess, better you should find a priest.

Louis: But I'm not Catholic. I'm a Jew.

Rabbi: Worse luck for you, bubbalah. Catholics believe in forgiveness. Jews believe in Guilt.

From the outset, then, the world of this play is announced, however satirically, as one in which forgiveness is not an option. Even before the rabbi's glib retort about Judaism and forgiveness, Louis confesses an indomitable faith in History (perhaps not surprisingly, the reference to Hegel is omitted from the televised version of this work³²) which, as he says, ought to progress smoothly and constantly toward perfection; not to be reversed or interrupted or turned inside-out by that which it cannot incorporate (vomiting, of course, being the gesture *par excellence* of anti-*Aufhebung*). And of course Hannah Arendt teaches us that that which history could not digest would be forgiveness. Which, for Derrida, would undermine the "power" of any self-proclaimed "neo-Hegelian positivist," taking place only as that which "I," in the face of the unforgivable, simply *cannot do*. Paradoxically, then, it is precisely because forgiveness takes shape as impossible throughout *Angels in America*, that it haunts it at every turn.

Particularly in the play's first part,³³ Kushner weaves a veritable web of unforgivability, primarily by means of the thematic thread of abandonment. This is a story in which nearly everyone leaves someone (and some leave everyone)—from Louis and Prior's cat, who is as unable to cope with illness as Louis; to Joe, who abandons his wife Harper for Louis, who has abandoned his dying partner Prior, who four years ago abandoned Belize³⁴ for Louis; to God himself, who, we

³² Tony Kushner, *Angels in America* DVD, dir. Mike Nichols (Warner Home Video: 2004).

³³ The first half is entitled "Millennium Approaches," and the second part is named "Perestroika," after the progressive invocation of capitalism that more or less single-handedly dismantled the Soviet Union.

³⁴ An African-American ex-drag queen and prior lover of Prior's. Belize also plays the unenviable role of Roy Cohn's medical attendant as the latter is dying. Cohn, an unapologetic bigot whose immunity failure coincides with his seeing ghosts, calls Belize a host of unforgivable, not-quite-human names, including "butterfingers spook faggot nurse." Cohn later mistakes Belize for the angel of death (*Angels II*, act 1, scene 5, p. 27; act 3, scene 5, p. 74-7).

learn, abandoned his angels and all of creation in 1906 during the San Francisco earthquake (so even God suffers from a “neo-Hegelian” allergy to disaster). And in the midst of this raging ontological chain of betrayal lies the closeted Roy Cohn, now dying of AIDS, which he insists on calling liver cancer.³⁵

The last paragraph of Roy M. Cohn’s obituary on the front page of the *New York Times* quotes him as saying, “I sleep well at night. I won’t be saying ‘please forgive me’ on my deathbed.”³⁶ Indeed, of all the variously miserable characters in *Angels in America*, Roy is arguably the most unforgivable because he remains the most unrepentant: he has made his living as a gay Jewish anti-Semitic homophobic racist McCarthyite litigator, and he is intent upon dying as one. He is not only unrepentant, but *proud* of his career, and at one point tells his young apprentice (who has come to ask his surrogate father’s forgiveness for refusing a job offer he could not refuse), that he considers his “greatest accomplishment” to be his having convinced Federal Judge Irving R. Kaufman to impose the death penalty upon Ethel Rosenberg: “If it wasn’t for me, Joe, Ethel Rosenberg would be alive today, writing some personal-advice column for *Ms.* magazine. She isn’t. Because during the trial, Joe, I was on the phone every day... making sure that timid Yid nebbish on the bench did his duty to America, to *history*. That sweet unprepossessing woman, two kids, boo-hoo-hoo, reminded us all of our little Jewish mamas – she came this close to getting life; I pleaded till I wept to put her in the chair. Me. I did that.”³⁷

Interestingly enough, Roy never mentions Julius Rosenberg at all. It is specifically Ethel who haunts him (probably because she reminded him of his “little Jewish mama”), and whose ghost first appears in his living room as Roy testifies that having her killed was the greatest moment of his life. Roy, it seems, has performed a conjuring trick, summoning the one spirit of Marx he wanted most desperately to remain dead. And if *Specters of Marx* has taught us that the appearance of a ghost reveals the vulnerability of the specular integrity of history and sovereignty, *Angels in America* confirms as much. Roy Cohn gloats about the unforgivable crime he and he alone committed in the name of “history” until Ethel Rosenberg’s ghost interrupts him, catapulting him into an immunodeficient fit and telling him, “History is about to crack wide open.”³⁸

³⁵ Cohn insists on this because no one whom Ronald Reagan loves as much as he loves Roy Cohn could possibly be “a homosexual.” See *Angels I*, act 1, scene 9, 42-6.

³⁶ Albin Krebs, “Roy Cohn, Aide to McCarthy and Fiery Lawyer, Dies at 59,” *New York Times*, 3 August 1986, 1, 33. The headline on the second page of the obituary is somewhat differently phrased: “Roy Cohn, McCarthy Aide and *Flamboyant* Lawyer, Is Dead” (emphasis added).

³⁷ *Angels I*, act 2, scene 5, pp. 107-8; emphasis added. The first view the audience gets of Cohn’s office in the televised version, powerfully directed by Mike Nichols, shows a carefully framed and ostentatiously displayed copy of the *New York Times*, whose main headline reads, “Rosenbergs Executed as Atom Spies after Supreme Court Vacates Stay; Last-Minute Plea to President Fails” 20 June 1953, 1.

³⁸ Kushner, *Angels I*, act 3, scene 5, p. 112.

As the great Roy Cohn writhes on the floor of his Madison Avenue apartment, we will recall not only that haunting haunts as the interruption of power and sovereignty, but also that the only event that could crack open the reciprocal violence propelling history is forgiveness. But again, forgiveness is established in this play as impossible, unthinkable. The rabbi's caricature of Judaism aside, "Millennium Approaches" ties a series of knots of unforgivability, with everyone betraying everyone else in a God-abandoned world. Then, "Perestroika" shows us an almost staggering succession of scenes of attempted forgiveness that not only fail, but furthermore manage to deepen the very wounds that prompted them. Louis tries to repent to Prior, only to be told that the sin of abandonment "isn't forgivable," particularly when Louis bears no "visible" signs of his repentance.³⁹ Joe tries unsuccessfully to exorcise his sexual demons, only to watch his abandoned wife walk out on *him*.⁴⁰ And Louis tries to explain to Belize just how guilty he feels over having left Prior, only to be told that the man he has been sleeping with in the meantime is a special friend of Roy Cohn's.

Meanwhile, in the eye of this storm, there is Ethel Rosenberg. Still haunting the dying capitalist, the dead Marxist comes to the hospital to tell Roy he has been officially disbarred. With a fair amount of glee, the great attorney's most famous victim reports, "They won, Roy. You're not a lawyer anymore...They beat you. You lost." And now that Roy Cohn has finally been laid low, even if he remains totally without remorse, Ethel wonders whether she—herself scandalously unforgiven by the agents of "history"⁴¹—might somehow be able to do the impossible: I decided to come here so I could see could I forgive you. You who I have hated so terribly....I came to forgive but all I can do is take pleasure in your misery. Hoping I'd get to see you die more terrible than I did. And you are, 'cause you're dying in shit, Roy, defeated. And you could kill me, but you couldn't ever defeat me. You never won. And when you die all anyone will say is: Better he had never lived at all.⁴² The implication here is that when Roy Cohn dies, what "they" will *not* say is precisely what they *should* say when a Jewish man dies: the Kaddish.⁴³

³⁹ Kushner, *Angels II*, act 4, scene 1, pp. 82, 87. See also *ibid.*, act 5, scene 8, p. 140.

⁴⁰ See *ibid.*, act 4, scene 7, pp. 104-106; and *ibid.*, act 5, scene 8, pp. 138-140.

⁴¹ From her prison cell at Sing Sing, Mrs. Rosenberg wrote to President Eisenhower to request that he grant her and her husband pardon from the death penalty. Proleptically channeling *The Human Condition* (which Arendt would write five years later), she wrote, "I would entreat you to ask yourself whether that sentence does not serve the ends of 'force and violence' rather than an enlightened justice" (Luther A. Hunton, "Six Justices Agree: President Says Couple Increased 'Chances of Atomic War,'" *New York Times*, 20 June 1953, 1, 3). Eisenhower rejected her appeal, ostensibly because, her plea for mercy notwithstanding, she never *confessed* to the crime of which she had been accused. Another article published the day after the execution confirms that the Rosenbergs "each had been informed by the Department of Justice that confessions could win them a reprieve from death" (William R. Conklin, "Pair Silent to End: Husband Is First to Die—Both Composed on Going to Chair," *New York Times*, 20 June 1953, 1, 6).

⁴² Kushner, *Angels II*, Act IV, Scene ix, 112-4.

⁴³ The Mourner's Kaddish is the Jewish prayer for the dead that is traditionally recited

There is a long pause in the scene as Ethel waits for her unregenerate criminal to die his ignoble death—a pause that Roy finally breaks by calling softly for his mother: “Ma? Muddy? Is it...? Ma?” Annoyed that he is still alive, Ethel tries to tell Roy she is not his mother, but Roy persists in his delusional conflation, asking her to sing him a song. Ethel flatly refuses, until Roy starts to cry and says, “Please, it’s scary out here. Oh God. Oh God, *I’m so sorry...*”⁴⁴ And slowly, softly, Ethel begins to sing a Yiddish lullaby. In the Nichols film, she grasps the dying man’s hand with her ghostly purple-blue glove, falling suddenly silent when his hand drops from hers. Seeing he has died, Ethel squeals faintly with joy and presses the call button at the side of the bed. As she recedes into the darkness, Belize enters, sees a motionless Roy and says with quiet surprise, “Oh. Oh, you’re....” At which point, Roy bolts up in bed and shouts, “No I’m NOT!” I fooled you Ethel, I knew who you were all along. I can’t believe you fell for that ma stuff, I just wanted to see if I could finally, finally make Ethel Rosenberg sing! I WIN! (*he falls back on the bed*) Oh fuck, oh fuck me I...” And after a few more muttered words, Roy Cohn dies.⁴⁵

Invoking one of Derrida’s spirits, then, it could be argued that what takes place in the transaction between Ethel and Roy is something like a scene of conditional forgiveness, based on the logic of exchange. Ethel’s generosity to the man she has “hated so terribly” does seem to verge on the superhuman; and yet, it remains the case that she offers her powerful gesture of forgiveness only *after* he says he is sorry, even if he seems to mistake his victim for his mother. Roy’s apology—to *anyone*—is what Ethel takes in return for her song. And like many scenes of conditional forgiveness, this one simply reaffirms the initial relations of violence and resentment. Not only does Ethel cheer at the moment of Roy’s death, but his repentance turns out to have been a trick, so that when he finally does give up the ghost, Roy Cohn dies the same criminal he was when he “pleaded till [he] wept to put [Ethel] in the chair.” The forgiveness whose possibility Ethel raised has not taken place, and now that the criminal has died a criminal, it *cannot* take place.

by the son of the deceased, in the presence of at least nine other adult men (forming a *minyán*). It translates into English as: “Glorified and sanctified be God’s great name throughout the world which He has created according to His will. May He establish His kingdom in your lifetime and during your days, and within the life of the entire House of Israel, speedily and soon; and say, Amen. May His great name be blessed forever and to all eternity. Blessed and praised, glorified and exalted, extolled and honored, adored and lauded be the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, beyond all the blessings and hymns, praises and consolations that are ever spoken in the world; and say, Amen. May there be abundant peace from heaven, and life, for us, and for all Israel; and say, Amen. He who creates peace in His celestial heights, may He create peace for us and for all Israel; and say, Amen” (as translated on the Orthodox Union website, <http://www.ou.org/yerushalayim/kadish.htm>).

⁴⁴ Kushner, *Angels II*, act 4, scene 9, p. 113; emphasis added. In the Nichols film, Cohn says “I’m so sorry” three times.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

Unless, of course, forgiveness can *only* take place where it cannot take place. In a hospital room, for example, where “the polestar of human evil” remains dead and Belize, looking to steal Cohn’s ill-gained stash of AZT for some sick friends, summons Louis to smuggle it out of the hospital. Removing the “ridiculous” sunglasses he wears at two o’clock in the morning, Louis reveals two swollen, black eyes—the result of a confrontation with Joe concerning Joe’s relationship with “the most evil, twisted, vicious bastard ever to snort coke at Studio 54.”⁴⁶ To Belize, Louis explains these “visible signs” as “Expiation. For my sins,” before asking, “What am I doing here?” Belize retorts, “Expiation for your sins.” He charges Louis with the task of sneaking Cohn’s medication out of the hospital, and also of “thanking him” by saying, of all things, the Kaddish.

Louis recoils at this injunction:

Louis: I’m not saying any fucking Kaddish for him. The drugs OK, sure, fine, but no fucking way am I praying for *him*. My New Deal Pinko Parents in Schenectady *would never forgive me*, they’re already so disappointed, ‘He’s a fag, he’s an office temp, and *now look*, he’s saying Kaddish for Roy Cohn.’ I can’t believe you’d actually pray for...

Belize: Louis, I’d even pray for you. He was a terrible person. He died a hard death. So maybe....A queen can forgive her vanquished foe. It isn’t easy, it doesn’t count if it’s easy, it’s the hardest thing. Forgiveness. Which is maybe where love and justice finally meet. Peace, at least. Isn’t that what the Kaddish asks for?

Louis: Oh it’s Hebrew who knows what it’s asking?⁴⁷

On the one hand, then, the stage is set for the occurrence of another act of what Derrida describes as conditional forgiveness. Louis will say Kaddish in exchange for the AZT he is stealing, and the act will be one of sovereignty, with the “queen” doling out her pardon on the condition that her foe has been “vanquished.” On the other hand, Belize seems to herald the advent of something beyond the conditional and the possible when he acknowledges forgiveness to be “the hardest thing.” If it were an ordinary economic exchange, reaffirming the power of the forgiver, then forgiveness would be perfectly possible. As the scene goes on, however, it becomes increasingly clear that Louis does not *have* the power to perform this particular speech-act. Not only would his decision to “be a good son” and say Kaddish for Cohn constitute a betrayal that his biological parents “would never forgive,” but it also turns out he does

⁴⁶ Kushner, *Angels II*, act 4, scene 8, p. 109.

⁴⁷ An author’s footnote in the script says “I know, I know, it’s not Hebrew, it’s Aramaic, but for the sake of the joke....” The Nichols film changes the line to: “It’s Hebrew...or Aramaic or something....” (*Angels II*, act 5, scene 3, p. 122; emphasis added to the phrase “would never forgive me”). Either way, the point is that Louis does not know what the prayer is asking, which is for God’s name to be sanctified on earth; that is, for the kingdom of God to be established within God’s creation.

not even *know* the Kaddish (“I’m an intensely secular Jew, I didn’t even Bar Mitzvah”), and he certainly doesn’t have the requisite *minyán*. Belize urges him at least to try, and so Louis mutters the first few words before slipping into the Kiddush, and then the Sh’ma, before finally admitting, “This is silly, Belize, *I can’t...*” ...at which point the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg stands beside him, looking at Roy’s body and softly saying the words of the prayer Louis neither knows nor understands. As the Kaddish continues, Louis’s shaky voice echoes, joins, calls and responds to her ghostly one, which guides him through the final blessing:

Ethel: V'imru omain.

Louis: V'imru omain.

Ethel: You sonofabitch.

Louis: You sonofabitch.⁴⁸

“V'imru omain, you sonofabitch.” Could this be an expression of forgiveness without forgetting? As we have already noted, there *is* a certain economy at work here, both in the prayer-for-pills program and in Belize’s musings on the role of the sovereign. That said, it is not clear *who* the sovereign forgiver would be in this scenario. For it is not Belize who forgives Cohn. Nor is it Louis either, because he only begins to say the prayer when he *cannot* say it. Nor is it Ethel, because (the problem of her being dead aside) she can only speak the words she speaks *through Louis*, who is only there because he was summoned—or conjured—by Belize, who hates him. Moreover, it is not even clear who is being forgiven here, or for what. The most obvious criminal is Roy, but (the problem of *his* being dead aside) the crime he committed against Ethel Rosenberg was not the same as the crimes he has indirectly committed against Louis and Belize—that is to say, against the variously intersecting and divergent networks of queer and “brown” communities systematically targeted by Cohn and his neo-con father-figures. Exactly which crime—which is also to say which dead criminal in particular—would Ethel-through-Louis-by-means-of-Belize forgive? To complicate matters further, we recall that in the beginning of the scene, Belize explains the act of forgiveness Louis is about to perform as “expiation” for *his* sins, which we can imagine include his limousine liberalism; his naïve trust in progress, democracy, fairness, and America; his having slept with Roy Cohn’s protégé; his unforgivable abandonment of Prior; and above all, the betrayal to which his saying Kaddish for Cohn *itself* amounts. Suddenly, then, the forgiver, the forgiven, and forgiveness itself are all collapsed in the haunted sequence that follows the “*I can’t.*” “...*What I dream of...would be a forgiveness without power: unconditional but without sovereignty...*” Most significantly, the Kaddish is a mourner’s prayer that never mentions the mourner or dead person at all,

⁴⁸ Ibid., 122-3.

invoking only God: “Glorified and sanctified be God’s great name throughout the world which He has created....” But what use is this prayer in a world that God has *abandoned*? What use is it to ask God to establish the Kingdom on earth when God has flown from the kingdom in *heaven*? And what good would it do to forgive a criminal—whichever criminal is forgiven here, by whichever victim of an unforgivable crime—by calling upon an unforgivably absent, *criminal* God?⁴⁹ Or could it be at this point, when there can be no repentance, every ego is-as-haunted, and the most Exalted Forgiver of all has become the lowest criminal, that history might, in fact, “crack wide open”? Could the angel of America, whose “glory to...” never settles on an object, be heralding the advent of something like forgiveness?

“...Every time I make a theoretical statement about the event of forgiveness I am sure that I miss it....” The Kaddish scene toward the end of *Angels* concludes with the economic transaction that prompted it: Belize stuffs the AZT in Louis’s backpack and sends him on his way. The question, however, upon which everything rests is whether there has been a *moment* of unconditionality here—a suspension of the exchange, sovereignty, violence, and power that maintain the order of the possible. For as Derrida has taught us, the interruption of forgiveness would resist, and perhaps even change, the ordinary, God-abandoned course of things. Forgiveness would mark the advent of the impossible, even if it were only to appear for an instant and then slip away—like a dream, or a ghost, or an angel.

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⁴⁹ In his last conversations with the angels in a godless heaven, Prior the reluctant prophet suggests that even if God were to return, the angels should “Sue the bastard for walking out.” The script for the staged version ends with an optional scene in hell, where God decides to retain Roy Cohn as his defense attorney in a paternity suit. The Nichols version does not include this sequence (*ibid.*, scene 5, p. 130; scene 9, pp. 140-1).