

## Between Resentment and Reconciliation

### The Indeterminacies of Forgiveness in Derrida, Arendt and Jankélévitch

#### ABSTRACT-

My paper examines the different ways three seminal thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century - Jacques Derrida, Hannah Arendt and Vladimir Jankélévitch address the problem of reconciliation and forgiveness. All three struggle with the relation between forgiveness and historical memory, particularly with the question of how may one forgive without undermining past atrocities or flattening identities in favor of expedient resolutions, while addressing the issue of symbolic justice? Derrida's notion of forgiveness hinges on the impasse created by the encounter of the metaphysical ideal of pure forgiveness and the practical-historical circumstances that beckon it, bringing the relationship of the ethical and the political into the forefront of his discussion. In contrast, Hannah Arendt and Vladimir Jankélévitch are two thinkers whose ethic of forgiveness is structurally grounded in the political and reliant on sovereignty for its fulfillment. My paper attempts to bridge Derrida's ethics of forgiveness associated with non-sovereignty and the unassuming position of powerlessness with Jankélévitch and Arendt. In the following paper I would like to suggest that a comprehensive understanding of Derrida's conception of forgiveness would entail readdressing his critique of Arendt and Jankélévitch. By rereading Derrida's work in dialogue with Jankélévitch and Arendt, I will try to elucidate Derrida's perspective on the relationship between forgiveness, memory and politics in order to show that his vision of "hyperbolic forgiveness" is, for the most part, reconcilable with Vladimir Jankélévitch's adamant resentment and position of non-forgiveness as it appears in his 1964 essay "Pardonner?"

In 1964 the French Parliament adopted a law on non-limitation (imprescriptibilité) for crimes against humanity. This law was legislated in order to allow state prosecution of Nazi war crimes beyond the twenty year statute of limitation. In the ensuing debates, philosopher and musicologist, Vladimir Jankélévitch, published a piece called "Pardonner?".<sup>1</sup> In the article, translated into English as "Should We Pardon Them?", Jankélévitch argued against statutory limitations on Nazi war crimes, claiming that since the magnitude of the crimes committed surpassed any human scale, the passing of time, which usually serves a certain alleviating factor, does not apply as it would to other offenses. Moreover, since these crimes were a transgression of metaphysical magnitude, exceeding any possibility of appraisal or human understanding they are "imprescriptable" and are thus eternally inextinguishable. The natural working of time which figures as a central

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<sup>1</sup> A few years earlier Jankélévitch published a book titled *Le Pardon* which explored the philosophical and religious roots of forgiveness and entertained the absolute edict of forgiveness in face of evil. While these contradicting works pose a certain problem in the understanding of Jankélévitch's thought on forgiveness, the reconciliation of these two publications is beyond the purview of this paper.

aspect in the process of reconciliation cannot be applied to the case of the Holocaust where the incommensurability of Nazi war crimes precludes any possibility of punishment or judgment and thus of forgiveness. To quote Jankélévitch: "Pardoning died in the death camps."<sup>2</sup>

Derrida's essay "On Forgiveness" picks up at the point where Jankélévitch leaves off - the unforgivable. "Is this not, in truth, the only thing to forgive?" he asks.<sup>3</sup> What would be the significance of the gesture if it were only to be limited to venial sin? If anything is to be forgiven, claims Derrida, it is mortal, unforgivable sin.<sup>4</sup> Derrida's notion of forgiveness hinges on the impasse created by the encounter of the metaphysical ideal of pure forgiveness and the practical-historical circumstances that beckon it, bringing the relationship of the ethical and the political into the forefront of his discussion. Derrida opens his essay by addressing the numerous scenes of repentance taking place throughout the contemporary political world. These contemporary theaters of forgiveness, in which we witness heads of state, communities and religious movements expressing remorse for past misdeeds represents the urgency of the past in its relation to the present and a general movement towards the reinscription of memory. But these gestures represent an erosion of what Derrida considers to be the true monotheistic tradition of forgiveness, which is presently being globalized and subordinated to serve ulterior political interests.<sup>5</sup>

These proliferating scenes of repentance are embedded in a particular cultural-historical setting which Derrida attributes to the post Second World War juridical and ethical heritage with its emphasis on human rights and the coining of such terms as "crimes against humanity." It is this historical era that has "structured the theatrical space" of contemporary scenes of forgiveness. Derrida considers these scenes as no more than spectacles of forgiveness, empty rituals and simulacra that cover up for the calculated political interests and ulterior motives behind these public acts of penance.

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<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Jankélévitch. "Should We Pardon Them?" Trans. Ann Hobart. *Critical Inquiry* 22 (1996): 567.

<sup>3</sup> Jaques Derrida. *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. Trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes. (London: Routledge, 2001), 32. [Due to the required brevity of the paper, I have chosen to add a number of relevant quotations in the footnotes].

<sup>4</sup> "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 should not forgive; there is only forgiveness, if there is any where there is the unforgivable. That is to say that forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility itself. It can only be possible in doing the impossible." (32-32)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28.

This is not to say that Derrida is condemning such public acts that bring about political stability between and amongst war-stricken nations; what he is emphasizing is that acts of reconciliation that aim at normalized political relations and economic development through the working through of trauma do not constitute true forgiveness. For Derrida, once forgiveness is employed in the political sphere, serving the purpose of determined finalities it is corrupted.<sup>6</sup> These contemporary theaters of forgiveness are dominated by a logic of exchange: “It is always the same concern: to see to it that the nation survives its discords, that the traumatisms give way to the work of mourning, and that the nation state not be overcome by paralysis.”<sup>7</sup> While the discourse of contemporary forgiveness draws upon the concept of “crimes against humanity” and the sacredness of man to legitimate itself, it is meant to do no more than establish new political alliances and re-establish national solidarity within fragmented nation states.

In many ways Derrida's thoughts on forgiveness are constructed through his critique of Jankélévitch and Arendt on this point. While both Jankélévitch and Arendt draw their idea of forgiveness from the possibility of punishment, Derrida rejects this model as one that subsumes forgiveness under the logic of punishment making it subordinate to it. In Derrida's opinion Jankélévitch and Arendt's equivalence of forgiveness and punishment contaminates the unconditionality and purity of forgiveness by making it contingent upon the possibility of punishment. Moreover, both Arendt and Jankélévitch rely on a juridical framework in their understanding of the forgivable and unforgivable.<sup>8</sup> Punishment which figures as the correlate of

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<sup>6</sup> “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 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.” (Derrida, 32)

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> In *The Human Condition*, Arendt claims that “The alternative to forgiveness, but by no means its opposite, is punishment and both have in common that they attempt to put an end to something that without interference could go on endlessly. It is therefore quite significant, a structural element in the realm in human affairs, that men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish and that they are unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable. This is the true hallmark of those offenses which, since Kant, we call “radical evil” and about whose nature so little is known, even to us who have been exposed to one of their rare outbursts on the public scene. All we know is that we can neither punish nor forgive such offenses and that they therefore transcend the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power, both of which they radically destroy wherever they make their appearance.” [Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 241.

forgiveness for Jankélévitch and Arendt is a form of state executed retaliation which presupposes sovereignty. Punishment is conceived within a juridical discourse which relies on power, the power of the tribunal or court to carry out the word of the law. Derrida finds that the equation Arendt and Jankélévitch make between forgiveness and punishment corrupts the purity of forgiveness and renders it as just another instrument in the arsenal of the political. According to Derrida for forgiveness to remain pure it should always remain "heterogeneous and irreducible" to punishment, and by extension- to sovereign who distributes it.<sup>9</sup>

It would be worth noting the rift between Arendt and Jankélévitch that Derrida ignores when he pairs the two together in his critique. While Derrida's reading of Arendt is accurate, his pairing of Jankélévitch with Arendt is reductive of the moral significance Jankélévitch attributes to non-forgiveness. Once we separate Arendt from Jankélévitch, his thought on non-forgiveness may seem a lot closer to Derrida's own understanding of the relationship between forgiveness and memory. While Arendt's vision of "normalizing" forgiveness is future oriented,<sup>10</sup> Jankélévitch's essay is a harsh call for resentment and non-forgiveness, which is singularly concentrated on the events of the past and demanding a perpetual remembrance of the atrocities of the Shoah. Jankélévitch's main concern is the dulling of the memory of the Holocaust, of its "falling out of favor" with the European and French public who want to focus on the future and not the horrors of the past. Non-forgiveness for Jankélévitch is a means of preserving the immediacy of the memory of the Holocaust; he wants to salvage the Holocaust from its slow descent into the recesses of collective memory as just another

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> Arendt's perception of forgiveness appears in *The Human Condition* which is preoccupied with the realm of human affairs, primarily the political conditions that allow human coexistence. As a result, her understanding of forgiveness is dictated by the social context wherein the main goal of forgiveness is the perpetuation of communal life. Arendt pairs forgiveness and the making of a promise as two redemptive potentialities that are both future oriented and have the power to undo the irreversible. While no action can possibly undo past events and their consequences, forgiveness and the promise are two speech acts that have the ability to stabilize the uncertainty of future relationships and create new horizons. Forgiveness serves a key role in society by allowing a dismissal of a wrong for the sake of maintaining the social fabric intact: "They [forgiveness and the promise] arise... directly out of the will to live together with others..."(246). For Arendt, forgiveness can only be understood within the social and political contexts which give significance to both the wrongdoing and its pardon. Forgiveness, like punishment, judgment and the law, allows a community to maintain the peaceful coexistence of its members. While Arendt's notion of forgiveness may be drawn from Christian religious tradition it functions with apparent political objectives; forgiveness in her philosophy is secularized in favor of the political, as an instrument of normalization- a point both Derrida and Jankélévitch reject.

abstract mass-atrocity of human history.<sup>11</sup> He does this by resuscitating the moral indignation at the Nazi assault on human life, which were "crimes against the human essence or, if you will, against the 'hominity' of human beings in general."<sup>12</sup>

The solace that normally comes with time cannot diminish the memory of this particular past; on the contrary, the passage of time, according to Jankélévitch, only intensifies our emotion in relation to this event. The healing process that comes with the passage of time is reversed in case of the Shoah. It is only the removal from the event and the temporal distance which allows us to grasp the dimensions of this wrongdoing. Time does not assist the healing of these wounds but rather brings the immensity of the catastrophe into full consciousness. Jankélévitch assumes the seemingly reproachful position of resentment. He refuses to "wipe the slate clean." Resentment is what restores the horrors of Auschwitz and prevents them from being incorporated into historical narrative which will eventually be forgotten. For Jankélévitch resentment is a moral responsibility in face of the impotence of time which cannot retrieve or amend any of the losses. Considering the irreversibility of these deaths, the only way to maintain the dignity of the survivors and the memory of the dead is to remain indignant.

Jankélévitch claims that forgiveness will officially seal the process of forgetfulness which has already begun. Jankélévitch is pained by the fact that such suffering was followed by an incredible surge in wealth and prosperity, what he considers to be the "pathetically inadequate renewal that the postwar period has brought us." He calls the meager consequences of the war the greatest tragedy of modern times which has helped erase the memory of the Human loss. The ease with which Europe is returning to its pre-war routine life is incommensurate with the events that occurred only twenty years earlier. He also expresses his frustration at the dissipation of any sense of guilt amongst the Germans and the disappearance of all guilty parties. Jankélévitch is asking: what is forgiveness without the moral

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<sup>11</sup> "Thanks to indifference, moral amnesia, and general superficiality, pardoning today is a fait accompli. Everything is already pardoned and settled. There is nothing left for us now but to establish a sister city relationship between Oradour and Munich. Certain remarkably unembittered French citizens found it completely natural six months after the war to renew fruitful business and recreational contacts with the former torturers of their homeland. As if the frightful humiliation of 1940 did not concern them. As if the shame of capitulation had never touched them. ... Forgetfulness had already done its work before statutory limitations; after statutory limitations forgetfulness would become in a sense official and normative. Our epoch is indeed lighthearted. From here on we would have the *right* to be lighthearted; we would have a juridically light heart." (Jankelevitch, 556).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 555.

transformation of the perpetrator or the recognition of wrongdoing on his part? Jankélévitch's point is that only conditional forgiveness that separates the repentant actor from his act respects memory. When we compare this point to Derrida's unconditional forgiveness, which forgives the guilty as guilty, would the ethical ramifications of such proposal not implicitly suggest the abandonment of memory?

How can one forgive without generalizing, without losing the singularity of forgiveness to a grand narrative of some sorts? When on the other hand, if forgiveness is to remain pure and discrete what meaning can it possibly have? Would not the irreducibility of forgiveness to any political or ulterior agenda outside of itself preclude the possibility of mutual understanding between victim and perpetrator? Derrida recognizes the inherent paradox of this situation and is left with only with the "madness" of forgiveness which is both irreducible and heterogeneous to its social significance, but nonetheless indissociable to it. Derrida's emphasis on the importance of historical memory, whether it is in relation to a universalized ethic or forgiveness, coincides with the point Jankélévitch is trying to make in "Pardonner?". Jankélévitch's refuses to come to terms with the past or forget it just in order to allow the continuation of social and economic life. His resentment demands the undoing of reconciliatory healing which he equates with amnesia. Jankélévitch expresses explicit outrage in face of Germany's *Wirtschaftswunder* and the normalization of diplomatic relations no less than twenty years after the allied forces arrived at the death camps. How can we forgive, asks Jankélévitch "when the guilty are fat, well nourished, prosperous, enriched by the 'economic miracle?'" Jankélévitch's resentment is caused by the failure to fully recognize past suffering. Against this drive towards normalization, Jankélévitch can only pose his refusal to forgive, his resentment is a moral commitment to the memory of the past which is in danger of being overridden by the normal course of social life. Forgiveness in Jankélévitch's opinion would constitute a moral compromise wherein the memory of all of the individual lives lost in the camps would be sacrificed for political and social normalization. The inability to reverse these atrocities is the reason Jankélévitch refuses to submit to the working of time and its healing capacities: "... The reactions that it inspires are above all despair and a feeling of powerlessness before the irreparable. One cannot give life

back to that immense mountain of miserable ashes.”<sup>13</sup> The only thing that can be done in order to preserve the dignity of the dead and the survivors is to Protest.

In this manner, the irrationality of Jankélévitch's call for non-forgiveness is similar to Derrida's madness of forgiveness. For Derrida "the aporia is the experience of responsibility," one which sets aside any political or economic calculations. Derrida's rejection of institutional forgiveness is akin to Jankélévitch's refusal to submit to the reconciliatory call of the hour:

...the anonymous body of the state or of a public institution cannot forgive. It has neither the right nor the power to do so; and besides, that would have no meaning. The representative of the state can judge, but forgiveness has precisely nothing to do with judgment. Or even with the public or political sphere....nothing to do with judicial justice, with law.<sup>14</sup>

If anyone has the right to forgive, according to Derrida, it will only be the victim. Derrida considers the calculations of reconciliation as antithetical to the "madness" of forgiveness. Is this not the same madness Jankélévitch proposes to counter the general inclination towards political and economic reconciliation which he witnesses in post-war Europe? Likewise, Derrida's aporia of forgiveness is a "paralyzing structure, something that simply blocks the way with a simple negative effect" and thus deflects the possibility of its incorporation within a foreign agenda. It remains irresolvable and thus maintains within it all moments prior to it. It is a continual vacillation between the transgression and its forgiveness, the singularity of the pardon and its social ramifications.<sup>15</sup> The aporia of Derrida's model of forgiveness prevents closure and the subsequent forgetfulness and erasure of the past with which Jankélévitch is so concerned. Jankélévitch is not denying the possibility of personal

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<sup>13</sup> Jankélévitch. p. 558.

<sup>14</sup> Derrida, 2001. p. 43.

<sup>15</sup> Forgiveness for Derrida is the endless indeterminacy of forgiveness as impossible ideal and its mediating social function: "I remain 'torn' (between a 'hyperbolic' ethical vision of forgiveness, pure forgiveness, and the reality of society at work in pragmatic processes of reconciliation). But without power, desire, or need to decide. The two poles are irreducible to one another, certainly, but what you just called the 'pragmatic processes', in order to change the law (which, thus finds itself between the two poles, the 'ideal' and the 'empirical' and what is more important to me here is, between these two, this universalizing mediation, this history of the law, the possibility of this progress of the law) it is necessary to refer to a 'hyperbolic' ethical vision of forgiveness. Even if I were not sure of the words 'vision' or 'ethics' in this case, let us say that only this inflexible exigency can orient a history of laws, and evolution of the law. It alone can inspire here, now, in the urgency, without waiting, response and responsibilities." (Derrida, 51)

forgiveness; what he is trying to do is staunch the process of wholesale forgiveness in service of political and economic convenience the same thing Derrida does when he rejects the notion of "forgiveness of normalization." The open-endedness of Derrida's model guarantees the avoidance of the trivialization of forgiveness or the possibility of it being usurped in favor of expedient normalization. Much like Jankélévitch, Derrida considers reconciliatory forgiveness as an evasion of real confrontation with the past and the gravity of the misdeed. Forgiveness as an instrument of social cohesion and the continuity of political life is disrupted by Derrida's messianic vision of forgiveness as a foreign, inter-subjective space within the political. Derrida's messianic ideal of forgiveness promises the conservation of memory "beyond history and the finite time of the law."<sup>16</sup> The structural paradox inherent in Derrida's model of forgiveness guarantees the preservation of the memory within its dialectical oscillations between private and public, meaningful and meaningless.

The problem with reconciliation, as Heidi Grunebaum points out, is that it operates through a discourse that "relies on unproblematized identities of the victims and perpetrators and on received and unchallenged constructions of race and identity. The term hides and facilitates a seamless slip from the realm of the intersubjective, face-to-face relations to the realm of the collective...Reconciliatory discourse puts a limit on what is said and remembered. It frames memory and assimilates it within a national narrative."<sup>17</sup> Reconciliation devalues the experiences of the victims and forgoes the past. It ignores the continued existence of trauma and the perseverance of the past into the present. Both Derrida and Jankélévitch display sensitivity to this oversimplification of forgiveness in the social sphere which flattens identities in favor of expedient resolutions.<sup>18</sup> Non-forgiveness for Jankélévitch serves as a form of

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>17</sup> Heidi Grunebaum. "Talking to Ourselves 'among the Innocent Dead': On Reconciliation, Forgiveness, and Mourning." *PMLA* 117 (2): 2002. pp. 306-310.

<sup>18</sup> Derrida's concern with the preservation of memory in relation to the Holocaust comes up in an interview at Yad Vashem with Michal Ben-Naftali, in which he explores the question of whether can one speak about the Holocaust or forgive it without trivializing or generalizing the catastrophic singularity of the event. In response to Jankélévitch's conceptualization of the singularity of Nazi crimes, Derrida asks, is not every crime unique? Is not every death a distinct event unto itself? In that case what would constitute the singularity of the Holocaust in relation to all other singularities? This problem becomes particularly acute when Derrida contemplates the possibility referring to the Holocaust as a proper noun. Talking about the Holocaust as a proper noun would still raise the interesting paradox wherein every word one uses in order to talk about this singularity would be taken from general language, which would thus re-inscribe the singular event within common language. This question brings Derrida back to the question- "how can we forgive without turning the offense into the pedestrian?" Derrida refuses to use the Holocaust as a proper noun for the same reason he rejects

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symbolic justice meant to acknowledge of the victim's suffering whereas Derrida's hyperbolic forgiveness empowers the victim as well, giving him a voice and empowering him with an agency he may have lost as a victim. Jankélévitch's refusal to forgive clarifies an important distinction between the guilt of a nation and the guilt of an individual.

For Derrida, to remain "torn" between the ideal of pure forgiveness and its social applications as an instrument of reconciliation challenges the commonsensical and oversimplified relationship between victim and perpetrator. Rather than rely on clear-cut or fixed identities it posits a gap between communal and individual and the concurrent slippage between the two. The madness of forgiveness evades the calculated transactions which political discourse captions as forgiveness. Forgiveness exists within the gap created by contemporary political reality and the vision of the democracy-to-come which would allow forgiveness to engage two unmediated singularities, the victim and perpetrator, in a face-to-face encounter.

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positing it as a metaphysical category as Jankélévitch does. Derrida's position emphasizes its unfolding as a singular event with a concrete socio-historical context. While Derrida believes the Holocaust can help us reconsider various political and philosophical questions, turning it into a transcendental event mythologizes human suffering and prevents us from examining the true structural limitations of translating genocide into an ethic in favor of an a-historical metaphysical abstraction. [Jaques Derrida. Interview with Michal Ben Naftali at Yad Vashem, Jerusalem. January 8<sup>th</sup> 1998. Trans. Mosher Ron. *Shoah Resource Center*. p. 2.]

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