

Literature in Secret:¹ An Impossible Filiation
by Jacques Derrida
trans. Adam Kotsko

“God,” if you’ll pardon the expression...

*Pardon for not meaning*²

Imagine that we left this statement to its fate.

Accept at least that for a time I abandon it thus, alone, also stripped, without goal, errant, indeed erratic: “Pardon for not meaning...” Is this statement a sentence? A sentence of a prayer? A question of which it is still too soon or already too late to know if it will have been only interrupted, deserving or excluding ellipses? “Pardon for not meaning [...]”

Unless I found this improbable phrase one day, unless it found itself, alone, visible and abandoned, exposed to every passerby, inscribed on a blackboard, legible on a wall, or right on a rock, on the surface of a piece of paper or saved on a computer disk.

Here is thus the secret of a sentence: “Pardon for not meaning...,” it says.

“Pardon for not meaning...” is now a citation.

The interpreter then leans over it.

An archaeologist can also wonder if this sentence is complete: “Pardon for not meaning to say...” but what exactly? And to whom? Who, to whom?

There is some secrecy, and we feel that literature is in the process of seizing these words without, however, appropriating them to itself in order to make them a thing of its own.

Such a hermeneuticist does not know if this question meant anything in a real context. Was it one day addressed by someone to someone, by a real signatory to a determined addressee?

The Test of the Secret: For the One as For the Other

Among all those who, in infinite number throughout history, have kept an absolute secret, a terrible secret, an infinite secret, I think of Abraham, at the origin of all the abrahamic

¹ *Au secret*, in addition to the more obvious meaning of “in secret,” can also mean “in solitary confinement,” in the sense in which a prisoner “in solitary confinement” is completely isolated from his fellow prisoners. As such, David Wood translates the phrase as “locked away” (in “Passions,” in Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995]: 29), precisely in the midst of a discussion of literature. In addition, it should be noted that *le secret* can refer to a royal seal [*sceau*], or more specifically to a seal used as a “counter-seal” over against the public seal; this meaning becomes relevant later in this essay as Derrida moves to a discussion of God.

² The French expression “*Pardon de ne pas vouloir dire*” is ambiguous, as is the case with many of Derrida’s most important turns of phrase. The word *pardon* could imply something like “I beg your pardon” or “Pardon me,” but since Derrida emphasizes the potentially fragmentary nature of the phrase, I have declined to supply any subject or object. Except in the context of this phrase and its variants, I have translated forms of *pardon* or *pardonne* with forms of *forgive*. In addition, the French idiom *vouloir dire* is most often translated as *to mean*, but literally it means *to want to say*. Throughout, I have translated it as *to mean*, but in cases where Derrida is playing on the literality of the phrase, I have translated it as *to mean to say*.—Trans. [All unattributed notes are Derrida’s.]

religions. But at the origin also of that fund [*ce fonds*] without which that which we call literature would doubtless never have been able to emerge as such or under that name. Would the secret of some elective affinity link thus the secret of the elective Covenant [*Alliance*]³ between God and Abraham and the secret of that which we call literature, the secret of literature and the secret in literature?

Abraham would have been able to say, but God also: “Pardon for not meaning to say.” I am thinking of Abraham who kept the secret, speaking of it neither to Sarah nor even to Isaac, on the subject of the command given to him, one on one, by God. The meaning of that command remained a secret to him. All that one knows about it is that it was a test. What kind of test? I am going to propose a reading of it. I will distinguish it, in this case, from an interpretation. At the same time active and passive, this reading would be presupposed by any interpretation, by the exegeses, commentaries, glosses, or decodings that pile up in infinite number over the millennia; consequently, it would no longer be simply one interpretation among others. Under the form, at once fictitious and not fictitious, that I am going to give it, it would belong to the element of a rather strange kind of evidence or certitude. It would have the clarity and the distinction of a secret experience on the subject of a secret. What secret? Well, here: unilaterally appointed by God, the test imposed on Mount Moriah would consist in testing, precisely, if Abraham is capable of keeping a secret: of “not meaning to say,” in sum. Even to the point of hyperbole: there where not meaning to say is so radical that it mingles almost with a “not being able to mean to say.”

What would that mean?

It is thus a matter of a *test*, undoubtedly, and the word is used by all the translators:⁴

“After these events, it came to pass that Elohim *tested* Abraham. He said to him, Abraham! He said, ‘Here I am.’”

(The demand for secrecy would begin at this instant: I pronounce your name, you feel you are being called by me, you say, “Here I am,” and you are committed by that response not to speak of us, of this exchanged word, of this given word, to anyone else, to respond to me only, uniquely, to respond before me alone, one on one, without any third party; you have already sworn, you are already committed to keep between us the secret of our covenant, of this call and of this co-responsibility. The first perjury would consist in betraying this secret.

But let us still wait to see how this test of the secret traverses the sacrifice of what is the most beloved [*cher*], the greatest love in the world, the uniqueness of love itself, the unique against the unique, the unique for the unique. For the secret of the secret of which we are going to speak doesn't consist in hiding *some thing*, in not revealing the truth of it, but in respecting the absolute uniqueness, the infinite separation of that which

³ Throughout, I translate *Alliance* as *Covenant*, which is a more familiar term in the biblical context in which Derrida is working. It should be noted, however, that *Alliance* is related to the French *lie*, which indicates a tie or a bond (whether conceptual or familial) and which often appears in this text.

⁴ Here, and throughout this text, Derrida compares the French biblical translations of Dhormes and Chouraqui. Since Derrida is consulting two translations that differ from each other in style and presentation much more than most English translations differ from one another, I will translate the texts given by Derrida directly, without attempting to conform my wording to that of any particular English translation.—Trans.

ties me or exposes me to the unique, to the one as to the other, to *the One as to the Other*):

“‘Take therefore your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, go away to the land of Moriah and there offer him in holocaust on the mountain that I will tell you.’ Abraham arose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, took his two servants with him, and in the same way his son Isaac, split the wood for the holocaust, headed off and went out to the place that Elohim had told him.”⁵

Another translation: “And after these words: ‘Elohim *tested* Abraham. / He said to him: Abraham! He said: Here I am. / He said: Take therefore your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, go into the land of Moriah, there, ascend the height / on the mountain that I will tell you. / Abraham arose quickly in the morning and bridled his donkey. / He took his two youths with him and Isaac his son. / He split the wood for the mountain. He set out and went toward the place that Elohim told him.”⁶

Kierkegaard couldn’t stop talking about the silence of Abraham. The insistence of *Fear and Trembling* corresponds then to a strategy that would require in itself a long and meticulous study. Most particularly with regard to the powerful conceptual and lexical inventions of the “poetical” and the “philosophical,” of the “esthetic,” of the “ethical,” of the “teleological” and of the “religious.” Around this silence are composed in particular what I will call movements, in the musical sense of the word. Four lyrical movements of fictive narration, so many addresses to Regine, in effect open the book. These fables belong to what can perhaps rightly be called literature. They relate or interpret in their way the biblical account. Let us underline the words that punctuate the resounding echo of these silences: “They rode *in silence* for three days. On the morning of the fourth day, Abraham *said not a word* [...] But Abraham said to himself, ‘I cannot hide from Isaac where this walk is taking him.’” But he didn’t say anything to him, so that at the end of this *first movement*, one hears an Abraham who is heard to speak only to himself or to God, in himself to God: “But Abraham *said softly to himself*, ‘Lord God in heaven, I thank you; it is better he believes me a monster than that he should lose faith in you.’”⁷ *Second movement*: “They rode along the road *in silence*... *Silently* he arranged the firewood and bound Isaac; *silently* he drew the knife....”⁸ In the *fourth movement*, the secret of the silence is certainly shared by Isaac but neither the one nor the other broached the secret of what has happened; they are moreover resolved not to speak of it at all: “*Not a word is ever said of this in the world*, and Isaac *never talked to anyone* about what he had seen, and Abraham did not suspect that anyone had seen it.”⁹ The same secret, the

⁵ Genesis 20:1-3, Dhormes trans. (*My emphasis*.)

⁶ *Ibid.*, trans. Chouraqui. (*My emphasis*.)

⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton UP, 1983), 10-11., translation altered.—Trans.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 14. Elsewhere, Kierkegaard speaks also of a “pledge of silence” (21). And everything that he calls the teleological suspension of the ethical will be determined by the silence of Abraham, by his refusal of mediation, of generality, of the law of the public sector (*juris publici*), of politics or of the state, of the divine; the divine is only the “phantom” of God (117), as the generality of the ethical is only the bloodless specter of faith; whereas Abraham is not, he should not, he cannot be a “phantom, a showpiece used for diversion” (53). “Abraham *cannot* speak,” Kierkegaard often repeats, insisting on this impossibility or this im-potence [*im-pouvoir*], on the “he cannot” before all “he doesn’t want to”; for he is passive in his decision not to speak (113-119), in a silence that is no longer aesthetic silence. The only difference that counts here is the difference between the paradoxical secret of Abraham and the secret of what must be

same silence thus separates Abraham and Isaac. For what Abraham has not seen, the fable will have specified, is that Isaac has seen him draw his knife, his face tensed by despair. Abraham does not know that he has been seen. He sees without seeing himself to be seen [*Il voit sans se voir vu.*] He is in this respect in non-knowledge. He does not know that his son will have been his witness, but a witness henceforth held to the same secret, to the secret that ties him to God.

Is it then fortuitous that it is in one of these movements, in one of these four silent orchestrations of the secret, that Kierkegaard imagines a great tragedy of forgiveness? How to harmonize together these themes of silence, of the secret, and of forgiveness? In the *third movement*, after an enigmatic paragraph wherein the silhouettes of Hagar and of Ishmael pass furtively into Abraham's pensive musing, Abraham implores God. Throwing himself to the ground, he asks forgiveness from God: not for having disobeyed him, but on the contrary for having obeyed him. And for having obeyed him at the moment when he gave him an impossible command, doubly impossible: impossible at once because he asked the worst of him and because God, according to a movement that we will ourselves have to come back to [*revenir*], will withdraw [*reviendra*] his command, interrupt it and retract it in some way—as if he had been taken by regret, remorse, or repentance. For the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in distinction from the God of the philosophers or of onto-theology, is a God who retracts. But we must not be too quick to give later names to the re-treat of this retraction before repentance, regret, remorse.

To follow this *third movement*, at the outset of *Fear and Trembling*, Abraham thus asks forgiveness for having been prepared for the worst sacrifice, with a view to fulfilling his duty toward God. He asks God's forgiveness for having agreed to do what God himself had commanded him. Forgive me, my God, for having listened to you, he says to him in short. This is a paradox which we must not stop contemplating. It reveals in particular a twofold secret law, a twofold constraint inherent to the vocation of forgiveness. It never shows itself as such but it always lets it be heard: I don't ask your forgiveness for having betrayed you or injured you, for having done you wrong, for having lied to you, for having perjured; I don't ask you forgiveness for a misdeed, I ask your forgiveness on the contrary for having listened to you, too faithfully, for too much faithfulness to the sworn faith, and for having loved you, for having chosen you or for having allowed myself to be chosen by you, for having responded to you, for having said, "Here I am"¹⁰ – and consequently for having sacrificed the other to you, my other other,

hidden in the aesthetic order or what must, on the contrary, be unveiled in the ethical order. The aesthetic demands the secrecy of what remains hidden, it rewards it; the ethical, on the contrary, requires manifestation; the aesthetic cultivates the secret, while the ethical punishes it. Yet the paradox of faith is neither aesthetic (the desire to hide) nor ethical (the prohibition of hiding) (cf. 107ff). This paradox of faith will impel Abraham in the scene, every bit as paradoxical, of forgiveness. Kierkegaard gives us at the same time the fiction and the truth of it, the true fiction that every scene of forgiveness perhaps remains.

¹⁰ Throughout this sentence, Derrida uses gender-inclusive language in a way that has no English equivalent. The gender of the past participles, and thus of the "you" of this passage, is explicitly rendered in a way that indicates either gender, rather than simply defaulting to the masculine as would normally be the case. For instance: in "*je ne te demande pas pardon pour t'avoir trahi(e)...*" (I don't ask forgiveness for having betrayed you...), the parenthetical "e" indicates that the "you" of the sentence could be either masculine or feminine. This usage is noteworthy because of the many other instances in this text where the logic of the texts he is analyzing dictates that the (normally generic) masculine be understood as referring exclusively to men.—Trans.

my other other as other absolute preference, my own, all those who are my own, the best of what is my own, the best of all that is my own, here meaning Isaac. Isaac represents not only the one whom Abraham loves the most out of all he has; he is also the promise itself, the child of promise.¹¹ It is this promise itself that he was on the verge of sacrificing, and this is why he still asks God's forgiveness, forgiveness for the worst: for having agreed to put an end to the future, and thus to all that which gives its breath to faith, to sworn faith, to the fidelity of every covenant. As if Abraham, speaking in his inmost heart, said to God: forgive me for having preferred the secret that ties me to you rather than the secret that ties me to the other other, to each and every other—because a secret love ties me to the one as to the other, as to my very own.

This law reinscribes the unforgivable, and error itself, at the heart of the forgiveness asked for or given, as if one always had to be forgiven for the forgiveness itself, for both sides of its address; and as if perjury were always older and more resilient than what it is necessary to be forgiven for as an error, as such and such perjury, but which already, ventriloquizing it, lends its voice and gives its movement to the fidelity of sworn faith. Far from putting an end to it, dissolving and absolving it, forgiveness then can only prolong the error. Giving it the survival of an interminable agony, it can only carry in itself this self-contradiction, this unlivable contestation of itself and of the ipseity of the self itself.

Here, then, is this *third movement*: “It was a quiet evening when Abraham rode out alone, and he rode out to Mount Moriah; he threw himself down on his face, he prayed God to forgive him his sin [in other words, Abraham did not ask forgiveness from Isaac but from God; somewhat like the French episcopate did not ask forgiveness from the Jews but from God, taking the Jewish community as witness, according to its own terms, of the forgiveness asked of God. Here, Abraham does not even take Isaac as witness of the forgiveness that he asks for, that Abraham asks of God for having been willing to put Isaac to death], that he had been willing to sacrifice Isaac, that he had forgotten his paternal duty to his son. He often rode his lonesome road, but he found no peace. He could not comprehend that it was a sin that he had been willing to sacrifice to God the best that he had, the possession for which he himself would have gladly died many times; and if it was a sin, if he had not loved Isaac to this extent, he could not understand that it could be forgiven, for what more terrible sin was there?”¹²

In this fiction of a literary type, Abraham himself considers his sin unforgivable. And that is why he asks forgiveness. One never asks forgiveness except for the unforgivable. One never has to forgive what is forgivable, and there is the aporia of the im-possible forgiveness on which we are meditating. Himself considering his sin unforgivable, the condition for asking forgiveness, Abraham does not know if God has forgiven him or will have forgiven him. At any rate, forgiven or not, his sin will have remained what it was, unforgivable. That is why the response of God, at bottom, does not matter as much as one could think; it does not affect, in its essence, the infinitely culpable conscience or the abyssal repentance of Abraham. Even if God presently grants him his forgiveness, if one supposed again, in the conditional anterior, that he would have granted it to him, or in the future anterior that he will have granted it to him in staying his hand, in sending him an angel and in allowing him this substitution of the ram, that changes

¹¹ Ibid., 21.

¹² Ibid., 13, translation altered.

nothing in the unforgivable essence of the sin. Abraham feels it himself in the secret, at any rate inaccessible, of his innermost heart. No matter what the status of his forgiveness, Abraham remains in secret, and also God, who in this movement neither appears nor says anything.

I will take account of this Kierkegaardian approach, but my reading will not depend on it for what is essential. The only thing it seems necessary to recall here is a kind of absolute axiom. Which? The resolute insistence of Johannes de Silentio on the silence of Abraham corresponds to the very original logic, design, and writing of *Fear and Trembling, A Dialectical Lyric*. Of course, I am already making an allusion, for reasons that will be clarified further on, to the incredible scene of the engagement with Regine and the relationship with his father; as for the *Repetition* of Constantin Constantius, published the same year under another pseudonym, it is a matter each time of a sort of *Letter to his Father avant la lettre*—before [*avant*] that of Kafka—signed by a son who publishes under a pseudonym. My own insistence on the secret corresponds to another decision of reading that I am going to attempt to justify. Nevertheless, before all these decisions, one *factum* remains incontestable, which founds the absolute axiom. No one would dare to deny it: the very brief account of what is called “the sacrifice of Isaac” or “Isaac bound”¹³ (Chouraqui) allows no doubt on this *fact*: Abraham keeps silence, at least as to the truth of what he is preparing himself to do. For what he knows about it but also for what he doesn’t know about it and finally will never know about it. Of the singular call and command of God, *Abraham does not say anything to anyone*. Neither to Sarah, nor to his own family, nor to men in general. He does not give up his secret, he does not divulge it in any space, familial or public, ethical or political. He does not expose it in any way to what Kierkegaard calls generality. Held to the secret, held in the secret, kept by the secret that he keeps all through this experience of the forgiveness asked for the unforgivable that remains unforgivable, Abraham takes responsibility for a decision. But for a passive decision that consists in obeying and for an obedience that is the very same thing for which he has to be forgiven—and first of all, if one follows Kierkegaard, by the very one whom he will have obeyed.

The responsible decision of a double and doubly assigned secret. First secret: he must not reveal that God has called him and has asked of him the highest sacrifice in the one-on-one of an absolute covenant. He knows and shares this secret. Second secret, but *archi-secret*: the reason or the meaning of the sacrificial demand. In this respect, Abraham is held entirely in secret simply because this secret remains a secret for him. He is then held in secret not because he shares but because he does not share God’s secret. Though he is passively held in fact to this secret of which he remains ignorant, as we do, he takes the both active *and* passive, decisive responsibility, of not putting the question to God, of not complaining, like Job, of the worst that seems to threaten him in the demand of God. Yet this demand, this *test* is at least, consequently, and here is what cannot be a simple interpretative hypothesis on my part, the test that consists in seeing up to what point Abraham is capable of keeping a secret, at the moment of the worst sacrifice, at the extreme point of the test of the secrecy demanded: the death given, by his hand, to that

¹³ *Is’hac aux liens*—the word *lien* here refers literally to the ropes with which Abraham bound Isaac, but the word can equally refer to relationships between concepts or emotional bonds (as of friendship, family, etc.)—Trans.

which he loves the most in the world, to the promise itself, to his love of the future and the future of his love.

The Father, the Son, and Literature

For the moment, let us leave Abraham there. Let us return to that enigmatic prayer, “Pardon for not meaning...,” on which, one day, as by chance, a reader could stumble.

The reader searches for himself. He searches for himself in seeking to decipher a phrase which, fragmentary or not (the two hypotheses are equally probable) could very well also be addressed to him. For he would have been able, at the point where he is suspended in his perplexity over it, to himself address this quasi-phrase to himself. In any case, it addresses itself also to him, from the moment that, up to a certain point, he can read it or hear it. He cannot exclude the possibility that this quasi-sentence, this specter of a sentence that he repeats and can now cite infinitely, “Pardon for not meaning...,” may be an artifice, a fiction, even literature. This sentence obviously makes reference. It is a reference. A francophone reader understands its words and its syntactical arrangement. The movement of reference is irrecusable and irreducible in it, but nothing allows one to fix, with a view to a full and assured determination, the origin and the goal of this prayer. Nothing is said to us about the identity of the signatory, the addressee, and the referent. The absence of a fully determinative context predisposes this sentence to secrecy and at the same time, conjointly, according to the conjunction that is important to us here, to its becoming-literary: every text given over to the public space, relatively legible or intelligible, but of which the content, the meaning, the reference, the signatory and the addressee are not fully determinable *realities*, realities at the same time *non-fictional* or *pure of all fiction*, realities handed over, as such, by an intuition, to some determinative judgment, can become a *literary* thing.

The reader is then conscious of literature coming by the secret way of the secret, a secret at the same time kept and exposed, jealously sealed and open like a purloined letter [*un lettre volée*]. He has a presentiment of literature. He cannot exclude the eventuality of his own hypnotized paralysis before these words: he will perhaps never be able to respond *to* the question, nor even answer *for* this swarm of questions: who is saying what to whom, exactly? Who seems to ask pardon for not...? For not meaning to say, but what? What does this mean? And why this “pardon,” exactly?

The investigator thus sees himself already in a position that would no longer be that of an interpreter, of an archaeologist, of a hermeneuticist, of a simple reader in sum, with all the status that one can recognize in the latter: exegete of sacred texts, detective, archivist, mechanic for the text-processing machine, etc. *Perhaps* he is already becoming, beyond all this, a sort of literary critic, indeed a literary theorist, in any case a reader who preys on literature, vulnerable to the question that torments every literary corpus and every literary guild [*corporation*]. Not only “What is literature?”, “What is the function of literature?” But “What relationship can there be between literature and meaning? Between literature and the undecidability of the secret?”

Everything is given over to the future of a “perhaps.” For this little sentence seems to become literary to detain more than one secret, and a secret that could, *perhaps, perhaps, not be one*, and have nothing of this being hidden of which *Fear and Trembling* was always speaking: the secret of what it signifies in general, and of which nothing is

known, and the secret that it seems to avow without unveiling it, as soon as it says, “Pardon for not meaning...”: Pardon for keeping the secret, and the secret of a secret, the secret of an enigmatic “not meaning,” of a not-meaning-to-say-such-and-such secret, of a not-meaning-what-I-mean—or of not meaning at all. Double secret, at the same time public and private, manifest in withdrawal, as phenomenal as it is nocturnal.

Secret *of* literature, literature *and* secret to which seems to be then added, in a manner still unintelligible but doubtless not fortuitous, a scene of forgiveness. “Pardon for not meaning.” By why “pardon”? Why should one ask pardon for “not meaning...”?

The fabulous reader, the reader of this fable of which I am making myself the spokesman, asks himself if he is indeed reading what he is reading. He seeks out a meaning to this fragment that is perhaps not even a fragment or an aphorism. It is perhaps a complete sentence that does not even want to be sententious. This sentence, “Pardon for not meaning,” is simply held in the air. Even if it is inscribed in the hardness of a stone, fixed white on black on the chalkboard or committed black on white to the immobile surface of a piece of paper, perceived on the illuminated screen (but with an airier or more liquid appearance) of a computer that hums gently, this sentence remains “in the air.” And it is by remaining in the air that it keeps its secret, the secret of a secret that perhaps isn’t one, and that, by this fact, announces literature. Literature? At the very least, that which, for a few centuries, we have called literature, that which is called literature, in Europe, but in a tradition that cannot not be an heir to the Bible, there borrowing its meaning from forgiveness but at the same time asking forgiveness for betraying it. That is why I am here inscribing the question of the secret as secret of literature under the apparently improbable sign of an abrahamic origin. As if the essence of literature, *stricto sensu*, in the sense that this Western word keeps in the West, were not essentially of Greek but rather of abrahamic origin. As if it lived from the memory of this impossible forgiveness whose impossibility is not the same on each side of the supposed boundary between abrahamic culture and Greek culture. Of the two sides, one does not know forgiveness, if I can say this, one knows it as the *im-possible*, but the experience of this impossibility, at least in my hypothesis, announces itself there as different. Untranslatably different, doubtless, but it is the translation of this difference that we will perhaps attempt here, later.

The secret perhaps without secret of this sentence that is held in the air, before or after a fall, according to the time of this possible fall, would be a sort of meteorite.

This sentence seems as phenomenal as *un météorite* or *une météorite* (this word has two sexes).¹⁴ This sentence appears to be phenomenal, because it first of all *appears*. It appears, that is clear, it is even the hypothesis or certainty of principle. It manifests itself, it appears but “in the air,” come from who knows where, in an apparently contingent fashion. A contingent meteorite just hitting the ground (for a *contingency* also means, according to its etymology, touch, tact, or contact) but without guaranteeing any pertinent meaning (for *pertinence* also means, according to its etymology, touch, tact, or contact). Remaining in the air, it belongs to the air, to being-in-the-air. It has its dwelling in the atmosphere that we breathe, it stays suspended in the air even when it hits. Right where it hits. That is why I call it *meteoric*. It is still held suspended, maybe above a head, for example that of Isaac at the moment when Abraham raises his knife above him,

¹⁴ *Ce mot a deux sexes*. The normal word for grammatical gender in French is *genre*. The word *météorite* can take either grammatical gender without a change in meaning.—Trans.

when he does not know any more than we what is going to happen, why God has asked him in secret what he has asked him, and why he is perhaps going to let him do or prevent him from doing what he asked him to do without giving him the slightest reason for it: an absolute secret, a secret to keep in sharing with regards to a secret that one does not share. Absolute dissymmetry.

Another example, very close to us, but is it another example? I am thinking of an incredible moment at the end of Kafka's *Letter to his Father*. This letter is not held either inside literature or outside literature. It *perhaps* takes after [*tient de*]¹⁵ literature but cannot be taken within literature. In the last pages of this letter, Kafka addresses to himself, fictively, more fictively than ever, the letter that he thinks his father would have *wanted, ought to have, in any case could have* addressed to him in response. "You could respond," "You could have responded" (*Du könntest... antworten*), says the son, which resounds also like a complaint or a counter-grievance: you don't speak to me, in fact you have never responded to me and never will, you could respond, you could have responded, you should have responded. You have remained secret, a secret for me.

This fictive letter of the father, included in the semi-fictive letter of the son, multiplies grievances. The (fictive) father reproaches his son (who himself reproaches him) not only for his parasitism but *at the same time* for accusing him, the father, *both* for forgiving him *and* thereby acquitting him. Franz Kafka does not see this spectral father, in writing to him, in writing to himself with the fictive pen of his father, any more than Isaac sees Abraham coming and understands Abraham, who himself does not see God, not seeing God coming nor where God is coming from at the moment of all these words.

What does this spectral father say to Franz Kafka, to this son who thus causes him to speak, by ventriloquism, at the end of his *Letter to his Father*, lending him his voice or giving him speech but also dictating his speech, causing him to write, in response to his own, a letter to his son, in a sort of fiction within the fiction? (Theater within the theater, "*the play's the thing*."¹⁶ We are thus spelling out, in this scene of the secret, of forgiveness, and of literature, the filiation of impossible filiations: that of Isaac whose father was ready to kill him, that of Hamlet—who refuses the name of son offered by the king, his step-father, the husband of his mother, his *father in law*,¹⁷ his father according to the law ["A little more than kin, and less than kind," he answers in an aside when the king calls him "my son," in Act I, Scene 2],¹⁸ that of Kierkegaard who had so much difficulty with the name and the paternity of his father, that of Kafka, finally, whose literature in sum investigated, in one genitive and the other, only the trial *of* his father. Literature would begin there where one no longer knows who writes and who signs the account of the call, and of the "Here I am!" between the absolute Father and Son.)

What, therefore, does the Father say through the pen of the Son who remains master of the quotation marks? Let us choose his arguments in an indictment whose dominant motif remains *the impossibility of marriage*, for Kafka, by reason of a specular identification with the father, and an identificatory projection that is at once inevitable and impossible. As in the family of Abraham, as in Hamlet, as in that which ties *Repetition to Fear and Trembling* at the edge of the impossible marriage with Regine, the

¹⁵ *Tient de* means *to take after* in the sense that a son "takes after" his father.—Trans.

¹⁶ English in original.—Trans.

¹⁷ English in original.—Trans.

¹⁸ Quotes from *Hamlet* in English in original.—Trans.

question at bottom is that of marriage, more precisely the secret of the “taking a wife.” To get married is to do and be like you, to be strong, respectable, normal, etc. Now I ought to do it and it is at the same time forbidden, I ought to do it and therefore I cannot; there is the madness of marriage, of ethical normality, Kierkegaard would have said:¹⁹

...though marrying is the greatest thing of all and provides the most honorable independence, it also stands at the same time in the closest relation to you. To try to get out of this quandary has therefore a touch of madness about it, and every attempt is punished by being driven almost mad. (*Hier hinauskommen zu wollen, hat deshalb etwas von Wahnsinn, und jeder Versuch wird fast damit gestraft*) [...] I must say that I would find such a mute, glum, dry, doomed son (*verfallener Sohn*) unbearable; I daresay that, if there were no other possibility, I would flee from him, emigrate, as you had planned to do if I had married [we are already, still, in the specular address which is soon enough going to become specular from the point of view of the father to whom, this time, Franz is going to simulate giving speech]. And this may also have had some influence on my incapacity to marry (*bei meiner Heiratsunfähigkeit*). [...] The most important obstacle to marriage, however, is the no longer eradicable conviction that what is essential to the support of a family and especially to its guidance, is what I have recognized in you; and indeed everything rolled into one, good and bad, as it is organically combined in you [...] And now marry without going mad! (*Und jetzt heirate, ohne wahnsinnig zu werden!*).

If you look at the reasons I offer for the fear I have of you, you might answer (*Du könntest... antworten*): “[...] you too repudiate all guilt and responsibility (*Zuerst lehnst auch Du jede Schuld und Verantowortung von dir ab*); in this our methods are the same [Kafka thus has his father say that they both act as mirror images of each other and do the same thing]. But whereas I then attribute the sole guilt to you as frankly as I mean it, you want to be ‘overly clever’ and ‘overly affectionate’ (“*übergescheit*” und “*überzärtlich*”) at the same time and acquit me of all guilt (*mich von jeder Schuld freisprechen*), and what appears between the lines, in spite of all the ‘turns of phrase’ [your ways of speaking, your figures of speech, your rhetoric, “*Redensarten*”] about character and nature and antagonism and helplessness, is that actually I have been the aggressor, while everything you were up to was self-defense. By now you would have achieved enough by your very insincerity (*Unaufrichtigkeit*), for you have

¹⁹ One could follow its traces for a long way through Kierkegaard’s work. Here I will remember only this indication of it: the interpretation of the “incomprehensible” gesture of Abraham (Kierkegaard insists on this necessary incomprehensibility, for him, of Abraham’s behavior) passes in particular through the silence of Abraham, through the secret kept, even if it meant from his own family, in particular from Sarah. This implies a sort of rupture of marriage in the heteronomic urgency, at the instant of obedience to the divine order and to the absolutely singular covenant with God. One cannot get married if one remains faithful to God. One cannot be married before God. But the entire scene of the letter *to* the father, and above all, within it, the fictive letter *of* the father (literature within literature) is inscribed in a meditation on the impossibility of marriage, as if there the secret of literature itself, of the literary vocation, remained: to write *or* to get married, there is the alternative, but also to write in order not to go mad by getting married. Unless one gets married in order not to go mad in writing. Writing’s madman.

proved three things (*Du hast dreierlei bewiesen*): first, that you are not guilty; second, that I am the guilty one; and third, that out of sheer magnanimity you are ready not only to forgive me (*bereit bist, nicht nur mir zu verzeihen*), but (what is both more and less) also to prove and be willing to believe yourself that—contrary to the truth—I am also not guilty.”²⁰

Extraordinary speculation. Bottomless specularity. The son speaks *to himself*. He speaks to himself in the name of the father. He causes his father to speak, taking his place and his voice, at the same time lending him and giving him speech: you take me for the aggressor but I am innocent, you attribute sovereignty to yourself in forgiving me, therefore in asking you forgiveness in my place, then in according me forgiveness and, doing this, you achieve the double blow, the triple blow, of accusing me, of forgiving me, and of acquitting me, in order to finish by thinking me innocent there where you have done everything to accuse me, insisting besides on *my* innocence, and therefore yours since you identify yourself with me. But here is what the father recalls to mind, in truth the law of the father speaking through the mouth of the son speaking through the mouth of the father: if one cannot forgive without identification with the guilty party, one can no longer forgive *and* excuse [*innocenter*] at the same time. To forgive is to consecrate the evil that one absolves as an unforgettable and unforgivable evil. By reason of the very specular identification, one cannot thus excuse [*innocenter*] in forgiving. One does not forgive an innocent person. If, in forgiving, one excuses [*innocente*], one is also guilty for forgiving. The forgiveness given is as faulty as the forgiveness asked for, it avows the fault. Consequently, one cannot forgive without being culpable and thus without having to ask forgiveness for forgiving. “Forgive me for forgiving you,” there is a sentence that it is impossible to reduce to silence in every forgiveness, and first of all because it culpably attributes to itself a sovereignty. But it does not seem possible to silence the inverse sentence: “Forgive me for asking forgiveness of you, that is to say, for causing you first of all, by the required identification, to bear my fault, and the weight of the fault of having to forgive me.” One of the causes of this aporia of forgiveness is that one cannot forgive, ask for or grant forgiveness without specular identification, without speaking in the place of the other and through the voice of the other. To forgive in this specular identification is not to forgive, for it is not to forgive the other *as such* an evil *as such*.

We will not comment on the end of this letter to the son, a fictive moment of the also entirely fictive *Letter to his Father*. But at bottom it carries in itself, perhaps, what is essential in this secret passage from the secret to literature as an aporia of forgiveness. The accusation that the fictive father will never withdraw, the grievance that he will never symmetrize or specularize (by the fictive voice of the son, according to that *legal fiction*²¹ that, like paternity according to Joyce, literature is), is the accusation of parasitism. It runs through the whole length of the letter, of the fiction, and of the fiction in the fiction. It is, finally, literary writing itself that the father accuses of parasitism.

²⁰ Franz Kafka, “Letter to His Father,” trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins, rev. Arthur S. Wensinger. In *The Sons* (Schocken, 1989), 162-166.

²¹ English in original.—Trans.

Parasitism: that is everything the son has devoted his life to, everything he avows having unforgivably devoted his life to. He has made the mistake of writing instead of working; he has contented himself with writing instead of marrying normally. Everyone here, in the name of the father, in the name of the father and of the son speaking to *himself* in the name of the father, in the name of the son denouncing himself in the name of the father, without holy spirit (unless Literature here plays the third in the Trinity [*joue ici la Trinité*]), everything makes the accusation of parasitism and everything is accused of parasitism. The son is a parasite—like literature. For the accused who is thus asked to ask for forgiveness is literature. Literature is accused of parasitism; it is bid to ask forgiveness by avowing its parasitism, by repenting of this sin of parasitism. This is true even of the fictive letter within the fictive letter. This latter sees itself justly prosecuted by the voice of the father such as it finds itself loaned, borrowed or parasited, written by the son: “If I am not very much mistaken [says the father-son, the father by the voice of the son or the son by the voice of the father], you are preying on me even with this letter itself (*Wenn ich nicht sehr irre, schmarotzest Du an mir auch noch mit diesem Brief als solchem*).”²²

The indictment of the father (speaking to the son by the voice of the son who speaks to himself by the voice of the father) had previously developed at length this argument of parasitism or vampirism. Distinguishing between chivalrous combat and the combat of parasitic vermin (*den Kampf des Ungeziefers*) which sucks the blood of others, the voice of the father is raised up against a son who is not only “unfit for life” (*Lebensuntüchtig*) but indifferent to this unfitness, callous to this heteronomic dependence, not caring about autonomy since he causes his father to carry the responsibility (*Verantwortung*). Then be autonomous! the intractable father seems to order him. For example, the impossible marriage that is in question in the letter: the son does not want to marry, but he accuses the father of forbidding him the marriage, “because of the ‘disgrace’ (*Schande*) this union would bring upon my name,” says the father under the pen of the son.²³ It is thus in the name of the name of the father, a name transfixed, parasited, vampirized by the quasi-literature of the son, that this incredible scene is written thus: as an impossible scene of impossible forgiveness. Of impossible marriage. But the secret of this letter, as we have suggested on the occasion of the *Todtnauberg* of Celan,²⁴ is that the impossible, the impossible forgiveness, the impossible covenant or marriage has perhaps taken place as this letter itself, in the poetic madness of this event that is called *The Letter to his Father*.

Literature will have been meteoric. Like the secret. One calls the meteor a *phenomenon*, that which appears in the brilliance or the *phainesthai* of a light, that which is produced in the atmosphere. Like a sort of rainbow. (I have never believed very much in what it is said a rainbow means, but I could not remain unaffected, less than three days ago, by the rainbow that appeared above the airport in Tel Aviv while I was coming back from Palestine, first, then from Jerusalem, a few moments before this city was, in an absolutely exceptional fashion, as it hardly ever happens to that degree, shrouded under

²² Kafka, “Letter to his Father,” 167.

²³ *Ibid.*, 166-167.

²⁴ See Jacques Derrida, “To Forgive: The Unforgivable and the Imprescriptible”, in *Questioning God*, ed. John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 21-51.—Trans.

an almost diluvian snow and cut off from the rest of the world.) The secret of the meteorite: it becomes luminous in entering, as one says, the atmosphere, from who knows where—but in any case from another body from which it had come unfastened. Then what is meteoric should be brief, quick, transitory. Furtive, that is to say, in its lightning strike, perhaps as culpable and clandestine as a thief. As brief as our still suspended sentence (“Pardon for not meaning...”). It is a question of time. At the limit of an instant. The life of a meteorite will always have been too short: the time of a flash of lightning, of a clap of thunder, of a rainbow. One says that the lightning or the rainbow is a meteor.²⁵ The rain as well. It is easy to think that God, even the God of Abraham, speaks to us meteorically. He descends on us vertically,²⁶ like the rain, like a meteor. Unless he descends in suspending the descent, in interrupting the movement. For example to say to us, “Pardon for not meaning to say...” Not that God himself says that, or thus retracts, but it is perhaps what “the name of God” means for us.

A fabulous reader finds himself represented here. He is at work. He seeks therefore to decipher the meaning of this sentence, the origin and the destination of this message that conveys nothing. This message is for the moment secret but it also says that a secret will be kept. And an infinite reader, the reader of infinity whom I see working, wonders if this secret as to the secret does not avow something like literature itself.

But then why speak here of avowal and of forgiveness? Why would literature have to be avowed? To be avowed for what it does not show? Itself? Why forgiveness? Why would forgiveness, even a fictive forgiveness, be asked for here? For there is this word of “pardon” in the meteorite (“Pardon for not meaning...”). And what would forgiveness have to do with the doubly deep secret of literature?

One would be wrong to think that forgiveness, already granting its verticality, is always asked from bottom to top—or is always granted from top to bottom. From on high to here below. If scenes of public repentance and forgiveness asked for are multiplying today, if they seem to be innovating now and then by coming down from the summit of the State, from the head [*de la tête ou du chef*] of state, sometimes also from the highest authorities of the Church, of a country or of a nation-state (France, Poland, Germany, not yet the Vatican), the thing is not without precedent, even if it remains very rare in the past. There was for example the act of repentance of Emperor Theodosius the Great (under the order of St. Ambrose).²⁷ More than once God himself seems to repent, and to give signs of regret, or of remorse. He seems to change his mind, to reproach himself for having acted badly, to retract and commit himself not to do it again. And his gesture

²⁵ In French, *la météore* can include all celestial manifestations in the sky, such as the various *meteorological* phenomena noted in this paragraph. Throughout this passage, Derrida is also playing on the sense of *la météore* as the trace left in the sky by a falling celestial rock, with the remainder (the actual rock that falls to earth) being *la météorite*. Thus the phrase “Pardon for not meaning...” is called a “meteorite,” the remainder of the descent of God (cf. the opening of the essay, in which he mentions the possibility of finding the phrase inscribed upon a rock).—Trans.

²⁶ Cf. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford, 1968), 30: “The plane which is known to us, [God] intersects vertically, from above... In the Resurrection the new world of the Holy Spirit touches the old world of the flesh, but touches it as a tangent touches a circle, that is, without touching it.” For a detailed discussion of the relationship between Barth and Derrida, see Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida, and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge, 1995).—Trans.

²⁷ St. Augustine judges this act “*mirabilis*” in *City of God*. Cf. Robert Dodaro, “Eloquent Lies, Just Wars and the Politics of Persuasion: Reading Augustine’s *City of God* in a ‘Postmodern World’,” *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994), 92-93.

resembles at least a forgiveness asked for, a confession, an attempt at reconciliation. To take only one example among others, does Yahweh not retract on a fault after the flood? Does he not recant? Does he not repent, as if he were asking forgiveness, truly regretting the evil [*mal*] of a malediction that he had pronounced, when, before the sacrificial holocaust that Noah offered him, and smelling rise up toward him the agreeable and pacifying fragrance of the animal victims, he renounces the evil [*mal*] already done, the anterior malediction? It is written in fact:

I will never more curse [*maudire*] the ground because of man, for the object of the heart of man is evil, from his youth, and I will never more strike all living things like I have done:

All the days that the earth shall endure,

Sowing and harvest, cold and heat,

Summer and winter, day and night

Will not cease.²⁸

In another translation, one must underline the word *malediction*, the word for *maudire* which will be shortly followed by the word of benediction. Observe God. What does he do? What does he say? After having confessed a past malediction, which he commits to repeat no longer, after having in short secretly asked for forgiveness, in his inmost heart, as if to speak to himself, Yahweh is going to pronounce a benediction. The benediction will be a promise, thus the sworn faith of a covenant. A covenant not only with man but with every animal, with every living thing, a promise that one forgets each time one kills or mistreats an animal today. The promise or the sworn faith of this covenant took the form of a rainbow, that is to say a meteorite, and this is what we should meditate on anew, always on the trail [*trace*] of the secret, like that which allies the experience of the secret with that of the meteor.

I will not go on to curse [*maudire*] the earth again because of the earthling [Adam]:

Yes, the formation of the heart of the earthling is an evil from his youth.

I will not go on to strike every living thing again, as I have done.

All the days of the earth yet to come, sowing and harvest,

cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will not cease.

²⁸ Genesis 8:21-22, Dhormes trans.

God thus commits never to do again what he has done. What he has done will have been the evil of a misdeed, an evil no longer to be repeated, and thus to be forgiven, even if by himself. But does one ever forgive oneself?

An immense question. For if God asked forgiveness, from whom would he ask it? Who can forgive *his* act, his misdeed (the question “what”)? Or who can forgive *him* (the question “who”) for having sinned? Who could forgive *his* act or forgive *him*, if not himself?²⁹ Can one ever ask forgiveness from oneself? But can I ever ask forgiveness from anyone else, seeing that I should, it seems to me, they tell us, identify myself sufficiently with the other, with the victim, in order to ask forgiveness from him knowing what I’m talking about, knowing, in order to experience in my turn, *in his place*, the evil that I have done to him? The evil that I continue to do to him, at the very moment of asking forgiveness, that is to say at the moment of betraying again, of prolonging this perjury in which the sworn faith will already have consisted, its very infidelity? This question of the asking, this prayer of forgiveness asked for seeks its undiscoverable place, at the edge of literature, in the substitution of this “in place of” that we have recognized in the letter of the son to the father as letter of the father to the son, from the son to the son as from the father to the father.

Can one ask forgiveness from anyone other than oneself? Can one ask forgiveness from oneself?

Two equally impossible questions, and it is the question *of* God (question of “who”), of the name of God, of what the name of God (question of “what”) would mean, the question of forgiveness, we had spoken of it, dividing itself between the “who” and the “what.” But also discrediting and ruining in advance the distinction, this impossible division [*partage*]³⁰ between the “who” and the “what.”

Two questions to which one is always held to answer *yes* and *no*, neither *yes* nor *no*.

More than One

“Pardon for not meaning...”

Can this be *forgiven*? [*Est-ce que cela se pardonne ?*]³¹

If one speaks French, and if, without any other context, one is asked what “*se pardonner*” means, and if it is possible, one then retains in the equivocation of this grammar, in the locution “*se pardonner*,” a double or triple possibility. First, but let us hold back such a contingency as secondary, there would be that impersonal passivity of the expression that says “This fault is forgiven” [*cette faute se pardonne*] in order to signify, “One forgives it,” “It is forgiven,” “One can forgive it” (*it is forgiven, it is*

²⁹ The French reads: « Qui pourrait *lui* pardonner or *le* pardonner, sinon lui-même ? » *Pardonner* in French can be both a transitive and an intransitive verb, as the English *to forgive* cannot; thus Derrida is making a distinction between forgiving the person and forgiving the act of the person, a distinction that cannot be made in the same way in English.—Trans.

³⁰ *Partage* in French has the connotation of both “sharing” and “partitioning.”—Trans.

³¹ Expressions in the form *se pardonner* have three senses in French—they can be translated as either the passive voice or as a reflexive expression (“to forgive oneself”). In the plural, such an expression can also indicate mutual action (“to forgive one another”).—Trans.

forgivable).³² Let us interest ourselves more in the other two possibilities, in the reciprocity between the one and the other and/or the reflexivity of self on self: the “to forgive one another” [*se pardonner l’un l’autre*] and/or the “to forgive oneself” [*se pardonner soi-même*]. Possibility and/or impossibility which are marked by two syntaxes that both remain, each in its own way, identificatory and specular. It is a matter here of what one could call, displacing the expression a little, a speculative grammar of forgiveness.

What, in its destinal trajectory, was the letter *of* the father inscribed in the letter *to* the father, of Kafka? In the letter *of* the father of Kafka to the son and signatory of the letter to the father *of* Kafka, across all the genitives and all the signatures of this forgiving genealogy? Irrecusably, this letter of the father to the son was also a letter of the son to the father and of the son to the son, a letter to himself of which the stakes remained that of a forgiveness of the other that was a forgiveness of the self. Fictive, literary, secret but not necessarily private, it remained, without remaining, between the son and himself. But sealed in his inmost heart, in secret, in the writing desk [*secrétaire*] in any case, of a son who writes to himself in order to exchange without exchanging this abyssal forgiveness with the one who *is* his father (who *becomes* in truth his father and bears that name after this incredible scene of forgiveness), this secret letter becomes literature, in the literality of its letter, only at the moment when it is put on display to become a public and publishable thing, an archive to inherit, still a phenomenon of inheritance—or a last will and testament that Kafka will not have destroyed. For, as in the sacrifice of Isaac which was without witness or had no surviving witness except the son, that is, a chosen heir who will have seen the tense face of his father at the moment when he lifted the knife above him, all of that happens to us only in the trace left by the inheritance, a trace left legible as much as illegible. This trace left behind, this legacy, was also, by calculation or by unconscious imprudence, the hazard or the risk of becoming a testamentary word in a literary corpus, becoming literary by this very abandon. This abandon is itself abandoned to its drift by undecidability, and thus by the secret, by the destinerrance of the origin and the end, of the destination and the addressee [*destinataire*], of the meaning and of the referent of the reference that remains reference in its very suspense. All this belongs to a literary corpus as undecidable as the signature of the son and/or of the father, as undecidable as the voices and the acts that are there exchanged without exchanging anything (the “true” father of Kafka, no more than Abraham, has perhaps understood nothing and received nothing and heard nothing from the son; he has perhaps been still more “stupid [*bête*]” than all the so-called beasts, the donkey and the ram who have perhaps been the only ones to think and to see what is happening, what is happening to them, the only ones to know, in their bodies, who pays the price when men *se pardonnent*, forgive themselves or among themselves; I mean to say men, and not women; the woman, about whom we will see why and how she remains to be “taken,” is visibly absent, spectacularly omitted from these scenes of forgiveness between the father and the son). A corpus as undecidable, therefore, as the exchange without exchange of a forgiveness named, asked for, granted as soon as named, of a forgiveness so originary, *a priori*, and automatic, so narcissistic in short that one asks oneself if it truly takes place, outside literature. For the father called real has never known anything about it. Is a literary or fictive forgiveness forgiveness? Unless the most effective experience, the

³² Parenthetical phrases are in English in original.—Trans.

concrete endurance of forgiveness asked for or granted, as soon as it would have been linked with the postulation of the secret, had its destiny wagered in the cryptic gift of the poem, in the corpse in the literary crypt, as we suggested above concerning *Todtnauberg*, the scene of forgiveness between Heidegger and Celan. Forgiveness, then, would be the poem, the gift of the poem. It does not have to be asked for. In opposition to what one often says, it must, essentially, not respond to an asking.

In the “*se pardonner*,” in the speculative grammar of the *Letter to his Father*, we had recognized a scene of forgiveness at the same time asked for and granted—to oneself. This appears at the same time required and forbidden, inevitable and impossible, necessary and insignificant in the trial itself of forgiveness, in the essence or the becoming- forgiveness of forgiveness. If there is a secret secret of forgiveness, it is that it seems dedicated at the same time to remaining secret and to manifesting itself (as secret), but also to becoming, thereby, by specular identification, forgiveness of oneself, forgiveness by oneself of oneself, asked for and granted between oneself and oneself in the equivocation of “*se pardonner*,” but annulled as well, deprived of meaning by this very narcissistic reflexivity. Hence the risk run by its sublated and sublating [*relevée et relevante*]³³ nature, by that *Aufhebung* about which we could tastefully cite another body of literature that properly seasons the rule of speculative idealism with the rule of taste and cuisine, in *The Merchant of Venice* (“when mercy seasons justice”).³⁴ One should ask forgiveness only of the other, of the wholly other [*tout autre*], of the infinitely and irreducibly other other, and one should forgive only the infinitely other other—which at the same time is called and excludes “God,” another name of forgiveness to oneself, of the *se-pardonner*.

We had observed: after the flood, there was the retraction of God (let us not say his repentance), that movement of withdrawal by which God recants on what he has done. Then he does not take a new course of action only toward the evil done *to* man, that is, precisely, to a creature in whose heart malignity dwells, from its origin and in such a fashion that the flat rate of God, the flood, would have already signified a sanction, a response, the reply of a punishment corresponding to the evil in the flesh of the creature, in the creature as flesh. This evil in the heart of man should already have driven the latter, moreover, to atone and to ask forgiveness: forgiveness in exchange for forgiveness, as one says gift in exchange for gift. The retraction of God, his promise not to do it again, not to do any more evil, goes well beyond man, the only one accused of malignity. God retracts with regard to *every living thing*. He retracts before himself, speaking to himself, but on the subject of every living thing and of animality in general. And the covenant that he is soon going to promise commits him with regard to every living thing.

We will not here be able to delve into the immense question (semantic and exegetical) of the retraction of God, of his coming back upon himself and upon his creation, of all these movements of reflection and memory that carry him to the point of withdrawing what he has not done well, as if he were at the same time finite and infinite (a tradition that one could follow as well in the work of Eckhart, Boehme, Hegel, etc.).

³³ *Relever* is Derrida’s proposed French translation for the Hegelian term *Aufhebung*.—Trans.

³⁴ In English in original. Derrida also cites a French translation of Shakespeare that has a form of *relever* for *seasons*. For further discussion of translation problems posed by *The Merchant of Venice*, see Jacques Derrida, “What Is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?” trans. Lawrence Venuti, *Critical Inquiry* 27.2 (Winter 2001), 174-200.—Trans.

One must not be hasty in translating these returns upon self by “regret,” “remorse,” or “repentance” (although the temptation to do so is strong and perhaps legitimate). Let us consider only the redoubling, the retraction of retraction, that sort of repentance of repentance that envelops, in some way, the covenant with Noah, his descendants, and the animals. Between two returns of God upon himself, between two retractions, that which provokes and that which interrupts the flood, in the between-times of these two quasi-repentances of God, Noah is, in some way, twice forgiven. In two repetitions, he finds grace. As if the Covenant between the father and the son could only be sealed through the repetition, the double re-turning, the re-turning on oneself of this withdrawal or this retraction—of what one still must not, I insist on it, load with the common stock that a psychology, a theology, or a dogmatics to come will project into regret, remorse, or repentance. Unless these last notions depend, in their foundation without foundation, on this returning of God on himself, on this contract with himself in which God contracts with himself thus to return on himself. The dissymmetrical contract of the Covenant seems then to presuppose the double stroke [*trait*] of this withdrawal [*re-trait*] (*Entzug*, one would say in German), the redoubled re-traction of God.

If the texts that we are going to read thus seem *to mean* something (but do they mean it? Or are they asking us for forgiveness for not meaning?), it is perhaps something that one should hear before every act of faith, before every accreditation that would accord them whatever status it may be: revealed word, myth, phantasmatic production, symptom, allegory of philosophical knowledge, poetic or literary fiction, etc. It is perhaps this minimal postulation, this nominal definition, that it would then be necessary to articulate with what we above called an “absolute axiom”: it belongs to the one who is here named God, Yahweh, Adonnai, the tetragrammaton, etc., to be able to retract, others would say, “to repent.” To this “God” belongs the power to recall, and to recall that what he has done was not necessarily well done, not perfect, not without fault and without default. History of “God.” On the other hand, still content to analyze the semantics of words and of inherited concepts, namely, heritage itself, it is difficult to think a retraction that does not involve, at least in a virtual state, in the gesture of avowal, a forgiveness asked for.

But asked by God of whom? There are only two possible hypotheses, and they hold for every forgiveness: it can be asked of the other or of oneself. The two possibilities remain irreducible, certainly, and yet they come back to the same thing. If I ask forgiveness of the other, of the victim of my error, thus necessarily, of a betrayal and of some breach, it is of the other with whom, by a movement of retraction in which I am affected, auto-affected or hetero-affected, I identify myself at least virtually. Forgiveness is therefore always asked, through retraction, of oneself as of another, of another “oneself” [*à un autre soi-même*]. God, here, would virtually ask forgiveness of his creation, of his creature as of himself for the error which he has committed in creating men wicked in their hearts—and first of all, one is going to hear, men of desire, men subjected to sexual difference, men to woman, men moved by the desire to *take a woman*. In any case, before one admits any status or any value for it, before one has to believe it or not, this inherited text causes this to be read: forgiveness is a history *of* God. It is written or is addressed in the name of God. Forgiveness happens as a covenant between God and God through man. It happens through the body of man, through the

transgression of man [*à travers le travers de l'homme*]³⁵, through the evil or the error of man—which is only his desire, and the place of the forgiveness of God, according to the genealogy, the heritage, the filiation of this double genitive. To say that forgiveness is a history of God, an affair between God and God, through which we find ourselves, we men, is not a reason or a way of extricating oneself from it. At any rate it is necessary to know that as soon as one says or hears “forgiveness” (and for example “pardon for not meaning...”), well, God is party to it. More precisely, the name of God is already whispered. Reciprocally, as soon as one says “God,” among us, someone is in the process of whispering “forgiveness.” [Without the report of this anecdote being necessary to what I am in the process of advancing here, I remember that one day Levinas said to me, with a sort of sad humor and ironic protestation, as we were going to a dissertation defense: “Today, when one says ‘God,’ one should almost ask forgiveness or apologize: ‘God,’ if you’ll pardon the expression...”]

The first moment of the divine retraction follows when, men multiplying on the surface of the earth, God sees their desire. It is not said that he is jealous of them but that he sees men desire. His retraction begins when he sees the desire of men—and that the creation of this desire comes back on him. He notices that the men notice that “the daughters of men were beautiful.” “They took for themselves some women among all those whom they had chosen.”³⁶ They take them to themselves, translates Chouraqui, these daughters who are “good.”

As always, it is desire that engenders error. It is error. It thus oversees the logic of repentance and of forgiveness. Seeing that the men are taking women for themselves, that they *take women* (and as in the *Letter to his Father*, the scene of forgiveness, like that of betrayal and of perjury, turns around the “taking a woman”), God says (but to whom? He says it to *himself*, then): “My spirit will not always endure in the man, for he is yet flesh. His days will be one-hundred twenty years” (Dhormes). “My breath will not remain in the earthling in perpetuity. In his distraction, he is flesh: his days are one-hundred twenty years” (Chouraqui).

God then “repents,” says one translation (that of Dhormes who notes with a straight face that “anthropomorphisms abound in the stories of chapters 2, 4, and 6”); he “regrets,” says another (that of Chouraqui) to render a word that, it seems to me, they told me at Jerusalem, would mean something like “he consoles himself,” he goes back to do his mourning, in some way, consoling himself. This verb would not be without a relation of etymological resemblance, as often, with the proper name of Noah. But despite the small difference between “repenting” and “regretting,” the two translations that I am going to cite correspond in saying, according to the same expression, that Noah finds “grace” in the eyes of Yahweh. Having regretted or having repented having done evil in creating such a malicious man, God decides in fact to exterminate the human race and to cut off every trace of life on earth. He thus extends the genocidal annihilation to every

³⁵ *Le travers* has the meaning of both a “fault” or a “failing” and of a “spare rib,” referring to the rib of the man out of which God fashioned the woman (Genesis 2:21-25). I have translated it loosely as “transgression” in order to preserve at least a faint echo of Derrida’s pun. —Trans.

³⁶ Genesis 6:1-2, trans. Dhormes. Chouraqui: “And this was when the earthling began to multiply himself/on the face of the earth, women brought them forth./The sons of Elohim saw the women of the earthling: yes, they were good. They took to themselves some women among all those whom they chose.”

species of living thing, to all his creatures, with the gracious exception of Noah, of his family, and of a pair of each animal:

Yahweh saw that the malice of man on earth was great and that every object of the thoughts of his heart was always only evil. Yahweh *repented* of having made man on the earth and he was irritated in his heart. Yahweh said [but to whom is he speaking then? In secret or out loud? Is this not the origin of literature?]: “I will cut off from the surface of the ground the men that I have created, from men to the beasts, to the reptiles, and to the birds of the air, for I *repent* of having made them.” But Noah found grace in the eyes of Yahweh. Here is the story of Noah.

For what is important to us here, I recall solely, without reading it all the way through, that the translation of Chouraqui says “regret” and “I have regretted” in the place of “repent” and “I repent”—but keeps the same word “grace” for the lot that fell to Noah.

However one interprets the logic of this scene, one hesitates forever between justice and perversion, as much in the act of reading as in what is given to read. The grace that Noah finds in the eyes of Yahweh, we know the rest of it, does one have the right to translate it as “forgiveness”?³⁷ Nothing forbids it, it seems to me. God forgives Noah, only him, his family, and a pair of animals of each species. But in limiting his grace or pardon in such a terrible fashion, he punishes and destroys all other life on earth. But he conducts this very nearly absolute pangenocide to punish an evil and in the movement of regret for an evil that he has in short committed himself: having created men who have evil in their heart. As if he did not forgive men and the other living things for their own error, for the evil that they have in them, that is, desire, when he has committed the fault of putting it in them. As if in short, by the same token, he did not forgive himself his misdeed, the evil deed of his creation, that is, the desire of man.

If one further asks oneself how and why, regretting a misdeed [*méfait*], an evil-deed [*mal-fait*] about which he ill [*mal*] consoled himself, he authorizes himself as much to pardon Noah and his family as to punish all the other living things, then let us take into account two reasons adduced for this judgment. On the one hand, it is said immediately after that Noah was a “just man.” If he is therefore pardoned as just, and God recognized this justice in him, then in short he is more just than God himself, not the God who recognizes him as just (it is necessary to be just for that) but the God who still has to regret an evil from which he cannot exempt himself or who has a hard time forgiving himself. As *if* (I often say “as if” intentionally, as if I did not mean to say what I am saying, and this would be the beginning of revelation in literature) God asked forgiveness of Noah or before Noah in entering into the pact or covenant with him immediately after. On the other hand, in also pardoning the pairs of animals on the ark, in not killing the promise of life and regeneration, God pardons not only Noah, his own people, and a pair

³⁷ The connotations of pardon are much stronger in the French *grâce* than in the English *grace*; the verb form *gracier* is translated only as “to pardon” or “to reprieve,” without any of the other connotations of the English *to grace*. Thus, for the rest of the text, I translate *gracier* as *to pardon* and *la grâce* as *grace or pardon* while continuing to translate *pardonner* as *to forgive* and *le pardon* as *forgiveness*, except in the case of the phrase “Pardon for not meaning.”—Trans.

of each species. In the justice of Noah, he exemplarily pardons a life to come, a life whose future or re-birth he wants to save. The Covenant happens through that incredible grace or pardon about which it is truly difficult to know who accords it to whom, at bottom, *in the name* of whom and of what.

Yes, *in the name of whom and of what*, this punishment, this grace or pardon, and this covenant? Outwardly, the movement goes from God to Noah and his family. But God punishes and pardons in order to forgive *himself* by *causing himself* to be forgiven, in order to regret the evil and pardon himself. Besides the grace or pardon accorded to himself by the metonymy of Noah, in the name of God in the name of Noah, it is now extended exemplarily, indeed metonymically to all life, to all life to come, to come again. Just before the Flood (5:22), and after having regretted the evil in creation, God in fact says to Noah: “I will establish my covenant with you...” (Dhormes), “I am drawing up my pact with you...” (Chouraqui). Noah the just is then 600 years old. At the moment when he will command him to settle in the ark, God will say to him, “I have seen that you were just before me,” “Yes, I have seen you, a just man toward me.” The moment of the Covenant is thus situated in the great abyss of these forty days. Announced, promised at the beginning of the flood, this moment is repeated, confirmed when, after Noah causes “holocausts” (“risings”) to rise up on the altar, God announces without regretting, certainly, but promising not to do it again, that he will never again curse the earth because of man, whose heart is wicked, and that he will never again strike all living things. In blessing Noah and his sons, he confirms the Covenant or the Pact but also the power of man over every living thing, over all the animals of the earth. As if the covenant and the abyssal forgiveness went hand in hand with this sovereignty of man over the other living things. *Terrifying* sovereignty, of a terror at the same time felt and imposed by man, inflicted on the other living things. All that in the specularity of a God who has made man “in his image” (Dhormes), as his “replica” (Chouraqui).

Elohim blessed Noah and his sons. He said to them: “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth! The fear and terror that you will inspire will be imposed on all the animals of the earth and all the birds of the sky. [Chouraqui: “Your trembling, your terror will be on every living thing on the earth.” Dhormes moreover had to specify in a note: “The fear and terror that you inspire, literally ‘your fear and your terror.’” As if the terror could be inspired only by being first felt and shared.] All that swarms on the earth and all the fish of the sea will be delivered to your hand. All that moves and that lives will serve as nourishment for you, like the green plants: I have given all that to you. Only do not eat the flesh with its soul in it, that is to say its blood. I have claimed their blood, like their souls: I will demand it back from the hand of every animal, I will demand the soul of man from the hand of man, from the hand of each the soul of his brother. Whoever sheds the blood of man, his blood will be shed by man, for in the image of Elohim, Elohim has made man. As for you, be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and have authority over it.³⁸

³⁸ Genesis 9:1-17 [Dhormes].

Promising his Covenant with man and all living things, God promises never again *to do evil*. He will see to it “that there will never again be any Flood to destroy the earth.” But in order to avoid misdeed or crime, he will need a memory-aid, a sign in the world, a mnemonic device that will no longer be only the spontaneity of a living or auto-affective memory. The sign of it will be the meteoric rainbow: “The bow will be in the cloud and I will see it in order to remember the perpetual covenant between Elohim and all animal life in all flesh that is on the earth” (“I will memorialize my pact,” translates Chouraqui).

Immediately after,³⁹ it is recalled that Ham sees the nudity of his father and tells his brothers. Is this linking fortuitous? The fable that we never stop recounting, the ellipse of the time of every history, is also the nudity of the father. After so many generations, when this covenant is renewed with Abraham, it again happens in two times, before and after the supreme test. At first, in a first time, God announces his covenant by enjoining Abraham to be just and perfect (17:2), then after the so-called sacrifice of Isaac, in a second time, he confirms it *by swearing* that he will bless him and multiply his seed (22:16). Let us pass over in a single stroke a treatment of so many acts of forgiveness, grace or pardon, like that which Abraham asks for the just ones of Sodom (18:22-33). Let us pass over in a single stroke a treatment of so many oaths, for example the sworn oath of the covenant of Beersheba with Abimelech, a covenant that is made in the name of God (21:22-33), just before the test of the sacrifice of Isaac. Let us come back too quickly to what I called at the beginning the absolute axiom.

The axiom obliges us to pose or suppose a demand of secrecy, a secrecy asked by God, by the one who proposes or promises the covenant. Such a secret does not have the meaning of something hidden, as Kierkegaard seems to suggest. In the trial to which God is going to subject Abraham, through the impossible command (for which the one and the other must in some way cause themselves to be forgiven), through the interruption of the sacrifice that resembles again a grace, the reward for the secret kept, the fidelity to the secrecy implicitly asked for does not essentially concern the content of something hidden (the command to sacrifice, etc.) but the pure singularity of the one-on-one with God, the secret of this absolute relation. It is a secret without any content, any meaning to hide, no other secret than the very asking for secrecy, that is the absolute exclusivity of the relationship between the one who calls and the one who responds “Here I am”: the condition of the call and of the response, if there ever is any, and if it is ever pure. There is consequently no longer anything sacred in the world for Abraham, since he is ready to sacrifice everything. This test would thus be a sort of absolute desacralization of the world. As there is no longer any content to the secret itself, one cannot even say that the secret to be kept is sacred, the sole sacredness that remains. One can rigorously call it “holy” (in the sense of “separated”) but not sacred. (If literature, the modern thing that legitimately carries this name, “desacralizes” or “secularizes” the Scriptures, the holy or sacred Scripture, it repeats then, lays bare before the world, returns to the world, the sacrifice of Isaac). As if God said to Abraham: you will not speak of it to anyone, not in order than no one will *know* (and in truth, this is not a question of *knowledge*) but in order that there be no third between us, nothing of what Kierkegaard will call the generality of the ethical, of the political, or of the juridical. That there not be any third between us, any generality, any calculable knowledge, any conditional deliberation, any hypothetical

³⁹ Genesis 9:22.

imperative, in order that the covenant be absolute and absolutely singular in the act of election. You will commit not to disclose it to anyone. (One would say today: you will not confide yourself in anyone, you will not trust any member of your family, you will not disclose it to your family, or your kindred, or your friends, even if they were the closest among your kindred [*les proches parmi les proches*], you will not let your absolute confidants, nor your confessor, and especially not your psychoanalyst suspect anything.) If you did, you would be false to, you would betray, you would perjure, you would be unfaithful to the absolute covenant between us. And you will be faithful, at any price, in the worst moment of the worst test, even if you must put to death what is dearest to you in the world, your son, that is to say in truth the future itself, the promise of the promise. In order that this demand have the meaning of a test, it is necessary that the putting to death of Isaac not be the true object of the divine injunction. Besides, what interest would God have in the death of this child, were he offered in sacrifice? He never will have said it or meant to say it. The putting to death of Isaac becomes then, as secondary, an eventuality more monstrous still. In any case it is no longer the thing to hide, the content of a secret to save. It has no meaning. And everything will be suspended from this suspension of meaning. The injunction, the command, the demand of God, his imperious prayer are addressed, in order to put it to the test of an absolutely singular call, only at the endurance of Abraham. Only his determination is at stake, his passive-and-active engagement to not-be-able-to-mean-to-say, to keep a secret even in the worst conditions, thus unconditionally. To enter with God into an unconditionally singular covenant. Simply in order to *respond*, in a responsible fashion, in a corresponsibility engaged by the call. This is the test of unconditionality in love, that is, in the sworn faith between two absolute singularities.

For that it is necessary that nothing be said and that all of that at bottom, at the bottomless depths of this bottom, not mean anything. “Pardon for not meaning anything...” It would be necessary, in short, that the secret to be kept be at bottom without object, without any other object than the unconditionally singular covenant, the mad love between God, Abraham, and that which descends from him. His son and his name.

With that which descends from him, however, singularity is sealed but necessarily betrayed by the heritage which confirms, reads, and translates the covenant. By the testament itself.

What would literature have to do with the testamentary secret of this “pardon for not meaning...,” with the heritage of that promise and that betrayal, with the perjury that haunts this oath? What would literature have to do with a forgiveness for the kept secret that could be a “pardon for not meaning...”? Said otherwise, how does literature descend from Abraham, in order both to inherit from him and betray him? And in order to ask forgiveness for perjury? “Pardon for not meaning...” Is literature the forgiveness asked for desacralization, or as others would say in a religious way, the secularization of a holy revelation? A forgiveness asked for the betrayal of the holy origin of forgiveness itself?

Whereas literature (in the strict sense: as a modern occidental institution) implies *in principle* the right to say anything and to hide anything, in which respect it is inseparable from a democracy to come;

Whereas the supposed fictive structure of every work exonerates the signatory of the responsibility, before the political or civic law, of meaning and of referent (of what the *inside* of his text intends and aims at, exhibits, or encrypts, so that it is always able to *refrain from laying down* any meaning and referent, to mean nothing), all the while aggravating in the same measure, up to infinity, his responsibility for the singular event that each work constitutes (null and infinite responsibility, like that of Abraham);

Whereas the secrets or the effects of secrets encrypted in such a literary event do not have to respond or correspond to any meaning or reality in the world and they respond to a suspension of them in this regard (not to the suspension of reference, but to the suspension, to the putting between parentheses or between quotation marks, of the *thesis* of determined meaning or real referent, of their stopping; hence the properly *phenomenological*, thus meteoric, quality of the *literary phenomenon*);

Whereas literature is the place of all these secrets without secret, of all the crypts without depth, without any other bottom than the abyss of the call or the address, without any other law than the singularity of the event, the *work*;

Whereas this literary right to fiction presupposes a history that institutes an *authorization* (the status of an irresponsible *and* hyperresponsible *author*) of the performative decision to produce events that, as acts of language, are so many addresses and responses;

Whereas the advent of this right implies the indissoluble covenant between an extreme autonomy (the democratic liberty of all and each, etc.) and an extreme heteronomy (this right is given and can be recovered, it is limited to the precarious border of the contract that delimits the literary starting from *external* criteria: no sentence is literary in itself nor does it unveil its “literarity” in the course of an *internal* analysis; it becomes literary, it acquires its literary *function* only according to context and convention, that is to say from non-literary powers);

then literature inherits, certainly, from a holy history of which the abrahamic moment remains the essential secret (and who will deny that literature remains a remainder of religion, a link and a relay of sacro-sanctity in a society without God?), but it also disavows this history, this belonging, this heritage. It denies this filiation. It betrays it in both senses of the word: it is unfaithful to it, it breaks with it at the very moment of manifesting the “truth” of it and of unveiling its secret. That is, its own filiation: impossible possibility. This “truth” is under the condition of a disavowal of which the binding of Isaac already implied the possibility.

For this double betrayal literature can only ask forgiveness. There is no literature that does not ask, from its first word, forgiveness. In the beginning, there was forgiveness. For nothing. For not meaning anything.

We are breaking off here at the moment when God *swears*. Suspending the sacrifice himself, sending his angel for a second address, he cries, he calls Abraham and *swears*. But he swears only *before himself*, he says it, he avows it or claims it. How could

he do otherwise? Could he mean to say anything other than this tautology that doesn't mean anything?

At this instant, but starting from this single instant, autonomy and heteronomy make no longer only One, yes, more than One.

“The angel of Yahweh called Abraham a second time from the height of the heavens and said: ‘*By myself I have sworn—oracle of Yahweh—that, since you have done this thing and have not refused your son, your one and only, I will bless you and I will multiply your race like the stars of the heavens and like the sand on the shore of the sea, so that your race will occupy the Gateway of its enemies.*’”⁴⁰

“The messenger of YHWH cried to Abraham / a second time from the heavens. / He said: ‘I swear it by myself, word of YHWH: / Yes, since you have done this word / and since you have not spared your son, your one and only, / yes, I will bless you, I will bless you, / I will multiply your seed, / like the stars of the heavens, like the sand, on the edge of the sea: / your seed will inherit the gateway of its enemies.’”⁴¹

[NOTE: The original French text is « Littérature au secret : une filiation impossible », in Jacques Derrida, *Donner la mort* (Paris: Galilée, 1999). This text is intended for personal use only.]

⁴⁰ Genesis 22:15-17, trans. Dhormes. (*My emphasis*)

⁴¹ Ibid., trans Chouraqui. (*My emphasis*)