

Forgiveness? Up To The Victims

Excerpt from interview with Professor Jacques Derrida

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Translated from French by Dr. Moshe Ron

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

D- Obviously, it would take hours of talking to answer these questions. I believe that the only time in my life I have written the word ‘unforgivable,’ published the word ‘unforgivable,’ was concerning Paul de Man, in a text I have written about him, after this very brief episode in his life had been discovered, when he was twenty years old in Belgium and wrote articles in

collaborationist newspapers (10). When these texts were discovered, there were great debates in the United States. I wrote long texts on this subject, but in the first text I wrote, I said that in any case what Paul de Man had done at that moment was unforgivable. This is the word I used. I am not sure I forgive myself for having written this word.

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

Second reason: I think it is unforgivable simply because any crime and for instance the crime we are talking about... Paul de Man was not guilty of crimes against humanity, he was no butcher, no Nazi; still, he published literary articles in a newspaper that was collaborationist. In any case, for any offence, one does not have the right to forgive unless one is directly its victim. I myself cannot forgive de Man's offence, or that of any collaborator, because it is up to the victims of these offences, that is to say up to those who perished in the camps, or those who were persecuted by German or Belgian Nazis, it is up to them to forgive if they wish to forgive. But for me this is not forgivable, I have no right to forgive. This is what I wanted to say, at least these two things. Having said this, my conscience is not quiet for having written this. For it is also a way of saying in the absolute that what de Man did is unforgivable, and this I cannot say of anything or anyone. So my conscience is not quiet on the subject of this word I wrote. The only time in my life I have written this word, I wrote it to characterize the conduct of someone who was a friend, in whom I

always maintained a deep trust and who was, furthermore, dead. I blame myself still today for having written this word, and it is up to me somehow to ask forgiveness.

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

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

in cultures where the Torah is not somehow the origin? These for me are questions, not only speculative questions, but truly the questions of the historical existence in which we are.

Footnote:

10. *Like the Sound of the Sea Deep Within a Shell: Paul de Man's War*, trans. P. Kamuf, in *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*, eds. W. Hamacher, N. Hertz, T. Keenan (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989): 127-164 .

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