

## Chapter 12: After the Offense: Thoughts on Forgiveness

“Social Democracy thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren.”

-Walter Benjamin, Theses on History.

“I never, even for a moment, doubted what they told me. This is why it is that adults, even parents, can unwittingly be cruel: they cannot imagine doubt’s complete absence. They have forgotten.”

-David Foster Wallace, All That.

### Introduction

The sequence begins with an offense, a violation. A boundary crossed, a provocation. A life taken, a body wounded, a mind assaulted—an enemy has appeared. Two figures now emerge—I and You, Us and Them. It is in the relation between these two figures that, along with questions of retaliation, revenge, and punishment, the question of forgiveness emerges. We have no doubt whatsoever about the meanings and manifest intentions of retaliation, revenge and punishment. Each aims to restore and buttress the status quo ante so as to prevent the recurrence of another violation. As for forgiveness, though, we are filled with questions. We do not know exactly what the word means, do not even know whether it is possible. We do not know whether forgiveness must involve both figures or can occur privately. We do not know its motives, nor even whether it is motivated. We do not know what is required

for it, what demands it makes on both the forgiver and the forgiven. Most fundamentally, we do not know whether forgiveness expresses a capacity or a failure.

Filled as we are with “not knowing”, we occupy the uncomfortable position of having to answer all questions about forgiveness by resorting to definitions, none of which is likely to be persuasive. For me, forgiveness might be this; for you, that. The term has no intrinsic, structural meaning. This chapter will focus on the fundamental plasticity and volatility of the meanings of both “forgiveness” and “being forgiven” and how this plasticity and volatility contribute to those terms’ irreducibly charged moral, social and psychological standings.

This text emerges from two provocations, one distinct, the other more diffuse and global.

(1) The first provocation came during my participation on a panel discussing the documentary film, “Facing Fear”. In the film, a young gay man, permanently expelled from his mother’s house, becomes a hustler in downtown LA. He is set upon by a group of skinheads and badly beaten. One of the skinheads says, “Here’s how you deal with faggots”, and kicks him in the forehead with his razor-tipped boot. The boy then loses consciousness and is, apparently, left for dead. He survives. 20 years later, he is working at LA’s Museum of Tolerance. He and one of the docents start casually speaking and discover their shared histories—same era, same neighborhoods, etc. Suddenly they both realize that the docent is the now ex-skinhead with the razor-tipped boots. Facing this, “facing fear”, I guess, the two work things out and start working together, giving presentations on forgiveness, and, in fact, becoming very close friends. The skinhead speaks of forgiving himself while the other man speaks of forgiving both his new friend and, toward the ending, of his hope that he can soon forgive his mother. This short film celebrates forgiveness without going into its workings, its determinants, its meanings, all of that being left for us to do, were we so inclined. The film, though, seems to both lean on and confirm the commonsensical notion that forgiveness of the sort we have just witnessed is, indeed, best treated at its face value of self-evident good.

I was not convinced. I immediately imagined a counterfactual narrative: the two meet and the gay man not only refuses forgiveness but also plots successful revenge, something like a profound beating or a damaging exposure, something irreversibly harmful, that is, something that resists the blandishments of apology and remorse and insists instead on the integrity borne by the right of refusal, the right of equivalent retaliation. This counter-narrative seemed to me plausible, reasonable, and no less courageous and dignified than the forgiveness narrative charted by the film.

It also seemed to me that nothing the ex-skinhead said or did—no amount of sorrow or remorse, no matter how sincere-- obligated the beaten boy to forgive him. On the contrary, I thought that, just as the boy, by being gay, in effect earned the right to be beaten alone, he now maintains the right to that same aloneness, to the same privacy that marked his suffering. So, I thought, that when he considers how best to deal with the return of the man who wanted to kill him, each side of the revenge-forgiveness pair merits his consideration-- no more obligated to forgive than he is to seek vengeance.

And of this consideration, the film documented nothing. We have no sense at all that the boy considered and rejected the revenge option. Instead, what we have is the apparently automatic—reflexive—notion – shared by all--that forgiveness—now of the skinhead, later of the mother--represents achievement, and revenge failure. Forgiveness, then, seemed the film's actual hero, the actors merely its vector. Revenge, on the other hand, skulked off-screen, the traditional villain, foiled again.

Though fueled by unlikely coincidence, the film's narrative was entirely unsurprising, a traditional moral—Christian, even—fable. Without any certainty about my own perspective on the revenge-forgiveness dyad, I was certain that the force of the fable—with its commonsensical dismissal of even the possibility of legitimate, ethical, and dignified revenge, warranted hesitation.

(2) The second provocation has been more diffuse. It stems from the tumultuous fallout of the presidential election of 2016. Aghast, both patients and colleagues, are reacting with a volatile mix of despair and fury. Lurking in that mix has been a profound sense of betrayal, a sense that our country has reneged on what had once seemed an unbreakable promise. For many, this sense of a broken promise feels like a hateful act of violence, and as such immediately raises questions of revenge and forgiveness, impulses toward understanding and toward retaliation. The sensible, forgiving, voice in this mix expresses sympathy for an abandoned and derided electorate, driven to protect itself by calling upon a strong-arming rogue. The vengeful voice in the mix dismisses this argument as a vapid cover-up for what it sees as the opportunistic, nearly eternal, and always simmering, structured forms of hatred—racism, homophobia, misogyny—that have found their longed-for spokesman.

What seems clear to me in this volatile mix of voices is the instantaneous confidence of each one, the sense that both voices easily find immediate, and reflexive, support from the evidence at hand. For the “forgiving” one, the “evidence” leads to strategies grounded in identification—tactics aimed at conciliation, coalitions, and repair. For the “vengeful” one, though, the “evidence” leads to strategies grounded in disidentification, pointing to a radical fissure that separates “us”, the civilized, from them, “the primitives”, and therefore to tactics informed by confrontation and muscle, mobilization and power.

Skinhead betrays gay boy; country betrays its promises. The wounds of betrayal create a state of emergency, an urgent demand for immediate redress, in one direction toward forgiveness, in the other toward revenge. Impulse—either forgiving or vengeful—promises relief. Each promise is persuasive. After the experience of betrayal, the promise of psychoanalysis is, as always, the promise of freedom, the opportunity to loosen the grip of impulse by transforming it into thought.

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My patient, desperate to make contact with her implacable mother, pleads: “Doesn’t it matter to you that I’m your daughter?” The mother, true to form, answers bluntly: “No”, and walks away. Though taking place 20 years ago, when the patient was an adolescent, this moment has taken on iconic status. The patient returns to it repeatedly. Its recall seems to orient her when, otherwise, she feels in the midst of “stupid” thoughts or half-formed ideas which she invariably interrupts and renounces as “false” or “not mine”. As the patient once put it, regarding the possibility of putting full sentences into words: “I won’t hand myself over to you. I’ll stay where I am. Dead is safe. That’s how the world is. The moment you want something, it will turn its back. I can’t stand it. I won’t do it.” The patient is now grossly overweight, eating in the middle of most nights, waking up, as she puts it, “disgusted”. She is involved in a desultory, sexless relationship with an undocumented immigrant who fears deportation if he leaves her. She spends weekdays with him, and weekends with her mother. “All I want is to have her say she loves me. I’ll do anything for her. I know it’s crazy. That doesn’t matter. There’s her over there and the rest of you here. Everything and nothing. She’s the only one I can be with. I’ll never hand myself over to you”

In her analysis, she can barely manage a sentence, usually stopping herself mid-word, “that’s so stupid”, “it’s not that”, “it wasn’t right”. Her sessions are peppered with a mix of

apology and dismissal: “you don’t deserve this”, “i’m sorry”, “who cares?”, “you’re the only one interested”. She often says that a sentence spoken to me would be an act of betrayal against her mother. Betrayed by her mother, she seems to sacrifice her life rather than risk betraying her back.

If there is even a hint of progress, marked, say, by a moment of emotional contact between us, or a welcome recollection of that morning’s session, the patient’s thoughts veer away from me and from us “like from poison “. “I can’t do that to her. She’d kill me if she knew about you. If she even knew I was in therapy. I can’t take care of her and myself at the same time. It’s one or the other. You’re not reliable. I can’t bring you with me when I leave here. I’m sorry. You’re not possible”

Midnight binge eating often follows. The morning after, the patient’s words have a ritualized, repetitive quality: “I can’t take care of myself. I must want it like this. Everything the same. It’s the only way to be safe. Dead is safe. How could she be so awful? How can I be exactly like her? I’m crazy”.

What the patient wants is to “bring you with me when I leave”. In other words, she “wants” to eradicate separateness, which she does, I think, by being “exactly like her” and therefore being “crazy”. She often says she “hates” me for the conditions I impose on her-- the fixed scheduled hours, the fact, as she puts it, that “you can’t be me”; my incapacity to eradicate dangers and create a “safe” zone for her. These complaints are presented as just that, complaints, as occasioning a righteous indignation that, “reality doesn’t work for me so why should I work for it”. All of this poses clinical difficulties-- the most brutal, for me, being feelings of such exasperation and fury that, were she to plaintively ask me: “doesn’t it matter that I’m your patient?” I might respond, cold and dead, “No”.

We often seem as attached as she and her mother once were, too close for anything but bitterness and stasis, never apart enough to manage psychic work. The sessions are inundated with feelings of failure, hers and mine, futility and uselessness. It is clear to me, though, that

such uselessness forestalls the threat of utility, the threat, that is, that she might find her way to consider taking steps to reverse what she once called “the total ruin of my life to keep alive the most malignant person I’ve ever known”.

This patient has not been able to tolerate any sustained reflection on her mother’s emotional treachery. She has neither forgiven nor renounced the mother. Instead, she has collapsed into a nearly-suicidal identification with her. “Doesn’t it matter that you are alive?”, an analyst might think. And her response to that question would certainly be a haughty, dismissive “no!”.

In order for the possibility of “forgiveness” (I put this in scare quotes to indicate my own sense that the word, though referring to a real sequence, nonetheless lacks clear meaning) to even arise, there must be an experience of separateness, a working boundary that allows for “I” here and “You” there. The insults that matter most, the ones inflicted like the mother’s “No”, target that boundary, serving as a reminder of the radical fragility of separateness and the associated sense of self-preservative viability. For my patient here, the possible restoration of this boundary poses a profound threat. “I’ll kill her; she’ll kill me.” The fantasied murder vector points in both directions simultaneously.

The patient has no confidence in her capacity to be still enough to think. The murderousness she imagines is not even vengeful; it is simply reflexive, a springing into action, not unlike her eating. Eating too much, like, as she says “stuffing my sentences back down my throat”, serves to stop time, maintain the patient in a state she calls “nowhere, not here, not there, not anywhere”. This state, in which time does not pass, is the only one she can manage without finding herself reflecting on “what I have done to myself” and “what my mother has done to me”.

Here are fragments from a representative session:

*I know I'm late. Just put it out there. Better than not. Don't know why. I'm two people.*  
50-50. (stops, head in hands, relaxes, looks away.)

*I'm there. I look at the clock. No, that's not it. Don't know why I'm telling you. 15 minutes. I'm OK. Then 10. Nothing.*

*{Analyst: Yes, nothing. You've gotten there, to nothing.}*

*I was making coffee. A drip. Put the grounds in. Poured the water. Was washing dishes. Then turned around and the water hadn't gone through. Nothing. It was clogged. That was too much for me. Why was it clogged? I can't stand it. Can't. Uncertain. (Stops. Head in hands. Deep breaths.)*

*{Analyst: Like thoughts. Start somewhere. Come up. Reach your mouth, your words. Then clogged. Stopped. Nothing. Can't think of why. Uncertain.}*

*Time comes alive. No. That's not it. Those are your words, not mine. Can't. Can't let go. Hold on. Just hold on. Crazy. I'm sorry.*

*{Analyst: Also clogged. My words to you. Don't pass through the filter.}*

*Had a bad day yesterday. Really bad. It was my car. Wanted to get an inspection. Nothing went right. What a mess.*

*{Analyst: This story is not clogged. Easy to tell me. What's the difference?}*

*I can do it. I can just say what happened. It wasn't me. It was the car. It's just a story. I'm not involved. With being late, it's me. There's the clock. I see it. And then I'm out. And then it's five minutes later. Is it important to be here? Don't know. It's important to not know. I look at the clock and then I'm unsure. What's gonna happen? Can't. Too uncertain. And then it's late. And then I'm here.*

*{Analyst: If the car does it, if the car's in charge, you can speak. If it's you, though, your mind clogs up. }*

*Can't be in charge. Too uncertain.*

*{Analyst: . Who knows what you can do. As is, you know exactly what you can do—nothing.}*)

The patient's central concern here is time. Her aim, it seems to me, is to keep herself out of time, to remain in a timeless, and therefore permanent, state, in which nothing can happen, or at least nothing that she does can happen; nothing will change.

In a session not long before this one, the patient had said: *"If I start to care for myself, my mother will kill me. She will. I know it. It's crazy. It doesn't matter. I know it. She'll fall apart. She'll die. Both. Me. Her. I don't know."*

My clinical aim here is to create a zone in which time does pass, dreams replace food in the middle of the night, sentences are spoken, and both "revenge" and "forgiveness" can be imagined and thought. Both forgiveness and revenge, in the sense I mean them, demand thought, demand, that is, an exit from the fixed and timeless pull of reflex, for this patient her static location on the seemingly permanent axis of "revenge or forgiveness", "kill or die". The scare quotes mark reflexive impulses; their absences would mark the emergence of uncertainty, of conscious consideration.

I think of the creation of that zone of uncertainty and therefore of possibility as, in fact, **the** formative act of forgiveness. Forgiveness forgives the offense by transforming it from a trigger of impulse into an object of thought. The original offense is registered as an excitation, presenting a problem, which, like Freud's notion of the drive, exerts a demand on the mind for work. It initially impinges on mind as drive does—exigently, insistently, engendering a state of tension whose only requirement, at that moment, is that it be managed. As thought transforms the means by which to satisfy the demands of drive, so forgiveness can transform the means by which to satisfy the demands of offense. Each turns reflex into intention, immediacy into delay. Forgiveness creates a pre-condition, a moment of neutrality, in which the future can be thought, aims can be considered, a condition my patient avoids on the grounds of its unbearable "uncertainty". Forgiveness is to offense as thought is to drive.

Psychoanalysts, grounded in a liberal enlightenment imagination, are, of course, biased against revenge and toward both forgiveness and reconciliation. Working with this patient, I have become acutely aware of my own participation in that bias. It was at work when I felt certain that the patient was nursing maternal insult, turning pain into sensuous grievance. Analytic effort, I thought, would target the determinants of this nursing and pave the way for eventual reparation. But then, over time, I found my inclinations inverting. I was being persuaded, by tilting in favor of a happy image of my patient spitefully and triumphantly turning the tables on her treacherous mother-- a simple transformation of grievance into retaliation and revenge.

And now, both directions have come to seem the product of bias, that is, of unthinking impulse, indifferent to the means by which its unchanging demand is satisfied. The bias is deep and totally lacking in idiosyncrasy-- as such, not exactly “mine”. Both “forgiveness” and “revenge” narratives tie patient, mother (and analyst) together in molecules utterly lacking in idiosyncrasy. Patient and mother are the participants and I the witness in a story already formed; none of us does anything to contribute to that story. The story tells us who we can be, what characters and what lines are available. This pre-existing story of maternal treachery and daughterly response contains zero degrees of freedom. Thought of this way, “revenge” and “forgiveness” take on a formal equivalence. Each is blunt and reactive; each offers a direction of flight from the potentially overwhelming particularity—the conscious responsibility-- necessary for the construction of first person singular voices, “I” the daughter, “I” the mother, “I” the witness.

In the clinical situation, “we”, the patient and I, need to work against the orbital pull of this pre-existing narrative, need to escape it and to each risk the resulting isolation, if we are to assume our “own” singular voices. For both of us, the pre-existing narrative functions as a permanent and reliable object, a comforting point of attachment. This narrative object is loyal, in contrast to an otherwise treacherous reality. It keeps us rooted and organized, horizontally bound

to an enormous and knowing community, one that, immediately and reflexively, will nod in affirmation when it hears either version of “our” story.

The countertransference problem here, then, is organized around this pre-existing narrative, the one that relieves both the patient and me from the burden of first person singularity. My effort, both intermittent and weak, aims to construct and to occupy a proper and neutral-- albeit wobbly-- middle-ground that allows for first person singularity. My target no longer seems located in the patient herself but instead in the underlying reflexive narrative which has the power to blur and swamp both of us.

When I can engage in this work, both “forgiveness” and its contrary take on a wan and pale coloration. Each seems thoughtless-- in some sense stupid. Both feel too distant and too late, too dumbly reflexive. Maternal insult and betrayal here have triggered a reflexive turn toward pre-existing narratives. The only viable clinical goal now seems to be the construction of a zone safe enough to promote separateness and thought.

Whether the lead reflexive impulse in the creation of this zone will have aimed toward revenge or toward forgiveness seems of little consequence. The point that matters, both for me and, I think, for the patient is to follow a lead, any lead, not in order to obey it but instead to find an exit from the dead, atemporal, zone of pure reflex. An impulse either toward “forgiveness” or “revenge” will do equally well.

Each can serve as a means to escape the trap of dumb reflex. Neither deserves the status of “gold standard”. Both impulses follow from insults to separateness and both imagine the insult undone. Neither imagines itself stopped in its tracks, before it is satisfied. But it is there, when the reflexive impulse has, in fact, been stopped in its tracks, mobilized but not yet satisfied, that thought can begin, and choice made. The work of forgiveness, then, creates the possibility for thought, the alternative to reflex.

Here is a second clinical example:

“I will not move. You can feel it, I bet, each time I cry. It’s like I ooze that sticky stuff that slugs have. The tears will get you. They’ll pull you into me. We’ll be together that way. I’ve never read anything you’ve written. I won’t. It’s too much. It would be over. Look at me. I love how you look at me. Our eyes catch and I have you.” She is the daughter of a philandering father who would stare at her body lasciviously, openly praising it in the presence of her “lumpy” mother. “That’s the look I still want from a man. Dominating. Aggressive. I hate it. I can’t love my husband. I can’t love at all. I’m where I was. With him. With my fucking father. Standing there with eyes that won’t let me go.” Although a feminist, and precise in her descriptions of paternal treachery, she has still not found a way to actually think about her father’s destructive impact. Instead, like my other patient, she “sticks” to him, to me, to her mother. “He was a good man, full of love.” She “will not move”.

Once she noticed my white hair-- “I never registered it before.” For weeks she apologized for what she was certain would be my conclusion that seeing me “old” meant she wanted me dead. Immediately afterwards she insisted on eye contact, session after session. “Just so I know you’re there. It doesn’t matter if you say something. I don’t care what I’m saying. Words don’t matter.” The incident is still in play. Now, though, she wonders what it meant. “Maybe I really do want you dead. I don’t know. How do I tell?” Here, I think, we finally found a jointly constructed moment of forgiveness. The permanence of reflex disturbed, retaliatory death wishes could be experienced, not as exigent fact, but as potential possibility. Will the father, both in her past and in the transference, be “forgiven” or “revenged”? Forgiveness has turned certainty into this question, has led to a moment marked by the telltale, and very welcomed, word-- “maybe”. Reflex’s immediacy has become thought’s delay. Forgiveness makes it possible for both “forgiveness” and “revenge” to be the product of decision.

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As in the “No” of my patient’s mother, the wrongs that matter most, the ones powerful enough to raise the issue of forgiveness, pertain to betrayal. I refer here to explicitly broken vows and promises, yes, but also, perhaps even more importantly, to assaults—physical and verbal-- on the very meanings of say, mother or father, spouse, friend, brother, doctor, policeman, neighbor. These categories of people are charged with supporting our feeling that the world can work, that wishing makes sense, that there is a place for us here. Betrayal challenges all of that. Betrayed, the world does not work, wishing makes no sense, there is no place for us. Betrayed, it is not the brute transgression itself that we must contend with—we might well be accustomed to brute transgressions-- but that it was **you** who transgressed, you in whom we had put our trust, you, a pillar of our sense of order. Betrayal targets our foundations, our confidence in lawfulness and continuity. It undercuts. The floor falls out. We may never land. The known enemy, already mapped as a hostile outsider, cannot betray us and therefore cannot provoke the issue of forgiveness. The betrayer occupies a dear and precious zone of our interior—as Anais Nin put it: a spy in the house of love.

Reason itself regularly betrays us. “Enlightenment...has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters.” (Dialectic of Enlightenment, p.1). This is the raw, simple transformative promise of reason, not, like psychoanalysis, to turn neurotic misery into common human unhappiness, but instead to turn fear into mastery and mastery into safety and care. The promise has, of course, been only cruelly realized. Nature, mastered, becomes ever more frightening, while human masters of reason are too few and too powerless, their motives and rewards too irrational, their triumphs too limited. Barely diminishing human fears, Enlightenment reason’s actual--even primary-- effects, then, after 400 years of dominion, must be said to include a worldwide eruption of the endangered and deprived; the increasing primitivity of the proud and the safe; a planet-wide war of embittered losers against protected winners.

Reason, like Freud's secondary process, depends upon delay and inhibition. These are its prerequisite. The losers, though--the ones for whom the question "Don't I matter?" has been answered "No"-- have run out of time; betrayed by reason, their demands are organized around one chilling word: Now.

This "Now", the social fuel for millions of people on the run, rattling fences across the planet, is also the hallmark of primary process, the fallback position for anyone unable to find sufficient satisfactions in the external world for the lost satisfactions of childhood. Neurotic and psychotic outcomes can both be conceptualized as a response to a feeling of betrayal of the implicit promise that what I have will not be taken from me, that I will be able to keep it or to at least find reliable and decent alternatives. The experience of pleasure in childhood contains that implicit promise-- that it will be repeated, that it will not only happen again, but will happen without end, and that pain, mastered now, will be perpetually mastered in the future. In this way, childhood pleasures converge with the enlightenment notion of reason-- each promise mastery over fear and pain. And neither, of course, can actually fulfill its promise. Both, then, contribute to our susceptibility to betrayal. Too much pain, too little mastery and we can no longer wait. And to wait means to forgive reason its already unrealized promises. Maybe next time-- this is the premise of the forgiving hope that underwrites delay and inhibition. Reason owes to tomorrow what it steadily fails to deliver to today. That debt cannot be forever deferred. But unlike so much of the world, psychoanalytic patients suffer from their betrayals rather than rebel against them. They soldier on, never quite "learning from experience" (Bion), and instead doggedly cling to shreds of pleasure, residues of promise.

And here, a third, this one more personal than clinical:

A gay colleague sero-converted to HIV-positive status approximately 25 years ago. He has been on anti-retroviral medicine ever since and has been doing relatively well, working steadily, writing, teaching and maintaining good physical health. About one year ago, he suffered a serious heart attack, cause unknown, although his doctor suspects a possible side

effect of the anti-HIV medication. Immediately upon recovering from the heart attack, my colleague, H., experienced a burst of elation, attached, he thought, to his relief and gratitude for having recovered.

We spoke a few days after the recent presidential election. H. was trembling as he began to speak, as though he were at his limit. He told me: "I regret having survived the heart attack. I wish I had never lived to see this. After all that we've gone through, all that we've done, to have this happen, this man elected...I can't bear it. I wish I had died first." He paused, seemed to gather himself, and then resumed: "For the first time, I understand suicide bombers. I can really see it. We could do it. All it would take would be for three or four of us to get invited to one of those parties. We could do that. We could muster those invitations. Then just get close enough to blow them all up, all of them, the fuckers that want us dead, want us disappeared."

This, I think, is the paradigmatic sequence: betrayal, followed reflexively by, in this case, a murderous impulse. This particular reflexive impulse is directed initially toward himself-- the wish to have died before ever having been betrayed. However, the object of this unstable reflex seems immediately transformed. At first the impulse targeted only a suffering interior object. But now it inverts and expands its target. It aims, reflexively, "vengefully", at suffering's external causes,, at "all of them", and in particular at their icons and their agents.

We met again a few weeks later:

*"I don't really know how to go on living. There is a global sense of betrayal. I won't even say his name. Dealing with betrayal really takes work. More work than I want to have to do. Neither of those first two reactions took any work."*

*"With my heart attack, the lights went out. My work was over. It's absolutely enraging now to have to face this."*

*All I can do is evade, try to figure out what feels easier and more agreeable, what I can really commit to. I can do clinical work, completely divorced from world out there. I don't want to have to be in public anymore.*

*It all feels useless and extraneous now. I want to be invisible. Want to figure out how to last my duration without having to think about them anymore.*

*I feel selfish. I'll be OK, covered by Medicare. I will shrink my domain of interests. Don't want to care.*

*(Protecting?)*

*My caring has a limit. I'm doing something different now with homeless people. Give them money. Ask their names. What they'll do to get warm this day. Feels possible. I'm not going to ask them if they're going to buy vodka. My judgment is not important.*

*I can do that amount of caring, nothing more.*

*(DM: You've contracted)*

*Yes, definitely. I remember a big march in '69. I felt so expansive. There were FBI marksmen on roofs with guns. I was part of a big important group. Our pictures were in life magazine.*

*And now I've gone from that end to this one. How sweet and naïve I was. I no longer wish to be part of the world. I was happy to be a part of it, but not now.*

*(DM: Today's truth is real while that one was naïve.)*

*I wish I weren't committed to what I'm feeling now. If I could devote my attention to remaining engaged. I would feel less isolated. But I don't know how. I am just too angry. I don't have the resources that would sustain me. I'm hoping that will shift.*

*All I can do is be alone. I walk here and I'm passing dead lovers. Old boyfriends, all dead. Vietnam. AIDS. Now this. There's just this pileup.*

*He is an existential threat like the war was. The people who stand to make so much money can't be stopped. It's as if nothing happened-- feminism, civil rights, nothing.*

*(DM: Just avoid pain)*

*But it doesn't work. I know.*

*Exchanging one kind for another. I can manage this kind. I can feel sorrow for one person at a time. I can't manage feeling angry all the time. I would feel enraged every moment.*

***If i could figure out a way to put a good enough boundary around the world, that would become possible.”***

Forgiveness restores that “good enough boundary”, the boundary violated by betrayal. Once that boundary is actually restored, come real, non-reflexive, possibilities for both “forgiveness” and revenge.

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### **The Forgiving Power of Mutative Interpretation**

In The Grand Inquisitor chapter of Brothers Karamazov, Ivan recites what he calls a poem. It is the time of the Inquisition. Christ has come back, returning to Seville. The people are in rapture, their Messiah returned. The Inquisitor orders the immediate arrest and imprisonment of Christ. The Inquisitor then spends the entire night speaking with Christ in his cell. He tries to demonstrate that Christ's doctrine is not what it seems: that is, the doctrine represents not love of humanity, but rather hatred of it. The Inquisitor argues that this hatred is most vividly expressed by the standard Christ sets in refusing the temptations of the devil. The devil demands that Christ prove himself, first, by turning stone into bread. Man does not live by bread alone, Christ responds. The devil then takes him to a cliff and demands that he fall, to see whether angels will catch him. Again, Christ refuses, the Lord should not be tested. And finally, the devil offers Christ unlimited wealth in exchange for worship. Christ sends him off.

In refusing those temptations, the Inquisitor says, Christ sets a standard-- a loyalty and love for the melancholy limits of consciousness and mortality-- that humans cannot meet. It is arrogance, argues the Inquisitor, to hold humans up to a standard fit only for the divine The

result is only gratuitous pain and self-laceration.. The Inquisitor argues that it is he and his forces who truly love humanity, who recognize and pity us for what we really are. This love is expressed by providing humanity with all that Christ would have denied them: bread for the body-- magic, mystery and authority for the mind.

Here lies love, says the Inquisitor, in power and provision, in terror. Christ's refusal, he argues, expresses not love, but spite and arrogance. The Inquisitor's willingness to dominate, though superficially hateful, in fact expresses charity and understanding, a profound and melancholy acceptance of human limitation. Throughout the night, Christ simply listens. He says not a word. No defense, no rationale, no argument—further temptations, again refused.

At sunrise, Christ stands and kisses the Inquisitor. He is then released and leaves Seville, never to return.

The kiss is enigmatic. It marks an ending. The scene is finished. Christ is gone. The Inquisitor vanishes. And we readers, disturbed and uncertain, are, perhaps like the Inquisitor, just left with it, that enigmatic kiss. There is no limit to what we can make of it. The kiss overflows with possible meanings. Whichever one(s) we might land on, though, we will, I think, soon sense insufficiency, the certainty that other meanings might be just as possible.

Let us make no mistake about it: the Inquisitor is in charge of a terrorizing organization, whose purifying aim is used to justify its unlimited means. His is the voice of terror, the voice of unlimited authority. Violence is love, he argues. Violence will not only cleanse the social field. Violence will also protect the private field, by freeing the human mind from the burdens otherwise brought on by the full awareness of its irreducible limitations and failures.

“Torquemada quickly established procedures for the Inquisition. A new court would be announced with a thirty-day grace period for confessions and the gathering of accusations by neighbors. Evidence that was used to identify a crypto-Jew included the absence of chimney smoke on Saturdays (a sign the family might secretly be honoring the Sabbath) or the buying of many vegetables before Passover or the purchase of meat from a converted butcher. The court

employed physical torture to extract confessions. Crypto-Jews were allowed to confess and do penance, although those who relapsed were burned at the stake. Wikipedia<sup>[26]</sup>”

What do we do about this kiss?

Without a pause, we can certainly interpret it as “forgiving”. Christ, Christianity, forgiveness...the whole package is waiting for us. If we pick up that package, our interpretation will place us at the end of a very long and very reasonable line. Deftly and effortlessly, we would have turned enigma into meaning. We would not only know that the kiss means forgiveness, we would also know what forgiveness means.

And what kind of knowing would this be? The kind that instantaneously obliterates an enigma, the kind arrived at by succumbing to the very category of temptation that the Inquisitor offers his flock—the temptation of magic—here, the magical gift of the pre-existing thought, the pre-existing interpretation.

If we resist the temptation, though, the enigma’s overflow of meaning persists. We may still feel confident that the kiss forgives, but we now have no confidence in what that forgiveness means. Meaning will only come after the kiss, not with it. The kiss establishes a kind of zero moment, the Inquisitor’s soliloquy finished, what follows not yet begun. What if we think of forgiveness, generally, as operating there, as establishing a zero, as pushing back the force of earlier narratives, postponing the emergence of later ones and thereby creating a new and open space for meaning to fill. As such, then, with meaning to follow, the kiss here may turn out to warn and punish, to accuse, taunt, mock, to abandon, to ridicule, or excite. It could comfort and relieve, disrupt and overwhelm. It could mark its provider as generous, merciful, and kind, but also as arrogant, contemptuous and cruel.

Once we mark the kiss as potentially forgiving, then, we still remain entirely uncertain of what, exactly, we mean and where, exactly, we might turn to find out. Does the meaning of the potentially forgiving kiss reside more in its effect or in its intentions? Can it be both? Is

forgiveness monadic or dyadic? Does it last? Must it last? Might it reside only in the flash of the moment? Is its meaning permanent or fleeting, enduring or volatile? To answer each of these questions, we simply wait. Meanings will emerge, wherever we look. The zero point will overflow with them, all of them.

The kiss here, like forgiveness generally, sets the stage for what, in the text, never comes—a commentary, a rebuttal, an argument...or, what Strachey, in his enormously influential paper, “The Nature of the Therapeutic Action of Psychoanalysis, calls a mutative interpretation.

Strachey refers to an interpretation made precisely at a “point of urgency” and that, at that point, interrupts a neurotic vicious cycle and initiates a benign one. What makes the neurotic cycle “vicious” is that the demands it satisfies are exigent and imperious; they insist upon immediate satisfaction. There are zero degrees of freedom in the neurotic vicious cycle. The pleasures of that cycle come from its stability, from its ongoing capacity to satisfy, and from its power to unburden its object from the labor of thought and choice.

That is, like the Inquisitor, the neurotic vicious cycle offers magic, mystery and authority—offers the ongoing immediacy of a continuous and orderly present tense. Strachey’s mutative interpretation is grounded in psychoanalytic structural theory—the imperious demands derive from the drives and from the superego. But also, somewhat surprisingly, I think, Strachey’s theory of mutative interpretation is also embedded in an implicit theory of forgiveness.

Christ’s kiss comes after a long period of listening. The Inquisitor is berating Christ, insisting that the standards set by his abstinent posture impose a hateful burden on a frail humanity, that these standards then represent only arrogance and contempt. The Inquisitor argues for what he calls “love” in the form of overtly authoritarian violence as opposed to the disavowed and therefore hateful violence imposed by Christ’s sanctimonious superiority. The Inquisitor finds a kind of stable harmony in the correspondence he locates between his own

violence and Christ's. For him, each form of violence affirms the other—he and Christ are a complementary pair, he, though, honest and Christ deceitful.

Christ refuses to defend himself, refuses to argue, refuses the premise of the entire monologue while receiving/listening to it all. We can think for a moment that the Inquisitor has established a transferential relation to Christ, a relation Christ hears of, understands, and contains. And in response to this, Christ finds a way of responding that is utterly outside the restricted, and violent, frame into which he has been invited. He finds a new, and surprising, way to signify his place outside of that frame, to, in fact, counter the frame's enormously dense narrative weight.

The kiss acts to demonstrate the fantastic underpinning of the Inquisitor's monologue while simultaneously affirming the listener's capacity to have heard the monologue and to remain as he was prior to hearing it: loving. The kiss, in effect, interrupts an imaginary structure and opens the possibility for a new, symbolic, one.

This is what forgiveness does, creates a possibility. Interpretation, then, seizes upon that possibility, that forgiving zero.

And, glossing Freud: where the zero of forgiveness was, the meaning of interpretation will be.

## **References:**

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