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Dreaming the Impossible: Derrida on the Gift of Witnessing

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Dreaming the Impossible: Derrida on the Gift of Witnessing

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Abstract

Reading closely a passage from “Ants,” a lecture Jacques Derrida delivered in 1990 at Université de Paris 8, this essay traces his thought about the nature of the gift. Starting with his proposition that “the gift must be given like a dream, as in a dream”, the essay shows how dreaming becomes, for Derrida, another name for giving beyond intention, reciprocity, or calculation, and even beyond reason. The dream interrupts both the order of knowledge and the circle of exchange within which every aspect of life tends to be inscribed in the sociopolitical imaginary of the West and, by extension, as a lever to open the question of justice, to invite response and to affirm the task of responsibility. Examining the constellation that ascends in Derrida’s lifelong work between the dream, the secret, and the gift, the essay argues that the only thing or nothing that could ever possibly be given *as a gift* is nothing more and nothing less than the act of witnessing. To give, in Derrida’s political imaginary, is to bear witness; to dream of a justice that remains always to come and is hospitable to the other and to the language of the other, and—above all—of a justice that begins and ends with a politics of faith and an ethics of unconditional responsibility.

“And yet this secret that I cannot confide to you is nothing, or rather is nothing outside of you, it is closer to you than to me, it resembles you.”

Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*

“So I am speaking to you in the night, *as if* in the beginning was the dream. What is a dream? And dream-thought? And dream language? Could there be an ethics or politics of dreaming that did not yield to the imaginary or to the utopian, and was not an abandonment, irresponsible, and evasive?”

Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*

“The gift, if there is any, will always be without border...[it] should overrun the border, to be sure, toward the measureless and the excessive; but it should also suspend its relation to the border and even its transgressive relation to the separable line or trait of a border.”

Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*

“What does ‘to give the word [*le mot*],’ ‘to give a word [*un mot*]’ mean?...To give the word, the gift of the word: is this the gift of a poem? Is it to give a password? Is it to betray a secret?...or what does it mean to give the thing? What is it to give? What does one mean by ‘to give’ before the word or the thing,” Jacques Derrida asks in “Ants” (17–20), a lecture he delivered in October 1990 at a colloquium organized by the Centre d’Études Féminines at Université de Paris 8. To all these questions, he responds with a proposition, with a thesis he puts forward in a somehow “dogmatic and elliptical fashion,” as he admits (20):

if there is such a thing as a gift [*don*], it must be given [*se donner*] like a dream, as in a dream. For the unconscious or for pure consciousness, there is neither gift nor pardon, only exchange and restrained economy...One can only give without knowing—and if consciousness as well as a certain unconscious are figures of knowledge, then allow me to see in the dream at least the figure of this gift that is borne between the two and beyond the two. No longer the gift for gift [*don pour don*] (gift and counter-gift), but the gift-pardon [*don-par-don*], when one must (an obligation without obligation) forgive the gift [*pardonner au don*] to interrupt the circle of revenge or break the mirror of resentment, at the point where one risks no longer knowing that giving knows how to receive. It is a dream, of course. And if one can only give in dream, one can only dream of giving. Even so, this requires the unchangeable and inexchangeable grace of certain dreams. Even so, one must know how to dream. Enough to outwit the miserly circle of absolute knowledge. (20)

The invitation Derrida extends here to whomever reads these lines seems to be unambiguous. What does it mean to give, he asks. What does it mean to

offer, to present someone with a gift? And what is a gift in the first place? In what shape or form does it arrive? What constitutes an act of giving, and what exactly does this giving of the gift entail? Who—if anyone at all—is capable of giving and who is or can be responsible enough to receive what is being given as a gift? All these questions, posed in such a dense and abbreviated manner in “Ants,” are much more than a sequence of philosophically intriguing meditations. Not only because, to this day, they remain timely, but also—and perhaps primarily—because when contextually examined, when read, that is, in relation to the rest of Derrida’s work, they allow us to see his proposition for what it truly is: neither dogmatic nor elliptical a thesis but a promise—the promise of deconstruction at large, so long as we accept that deconstruction’s own “dream,” as he mentions elsewhere, is nothing more and nothing less than the “convulsive movement to have done with death, to deconstruct death itself” (*The Death Penalty, Volume I* 240).

To deconstruct death itself; to push it to its limits, to trace death’s own aporias and confront its specters—what a dream, one would think. Yet it is a dream, and a dream that belongs neither to the order of the imaginary nor to that of the utopian, since death, in the long chain of associations we can trace in Derrida’s corpus, is never far from life, from the secret and the gift, from language and signification, from forgiveness, sacrifice, and mourning, from the archive and its ashes, from time and difference, from the event. If Derrida insists, that is to say, on the thesis he puts forward in “Ants” even at the risk of sounding dogmatic, if he deliberately chooses to align the act of giving with the dream, conceptually transforming it into the most exquisitely beautiful imperative one could ever possibly imagine, he does so not to trivialize or mystify the gravity an act as indispensable as that of giving has in the realm of the political. Quite the contrary: if he insists so much on the relay between dreaming and the gift, he does so because this relay allows him to speak precisely of the most intimate, the most covert but also essential aspect of the political, or rather, of its very condition of possibility. It allows him to touch—no matter how tangentially—on the thing or non-thing that conjures the political into being and grants it the vital space it needs to take place and unfold, a vital space that cannot, in fact, exist without dreaming for reasons that become more pronounced as soon as one delves deeper into the richness of Derrida’s political thinking. But let us begin from the thesis itself.

“The gift *must* be given *like a dream, as in a dream*,” Derrida writes. There is no uncertainty, no hesitation, no suggestion or merely an expression of yet another possibility or tentative outcome in this phrasing. There is only

necessity and obligation that emerges from his words with a certain kind of urgency, with a determination that leaves no room for doubt or prevarication. Whatever is being given in the form of a gift *must* be given like a dream, as if it *were* a dream. The only gift worthy of the name is the one that enters one's world the way dreams do: suddenly, taking one by surprise, arriving without an invitation, without a notice and without any further ado, and even without delay, perhaps, or rather, without any further delay than the one that is already inscribed in the movement of its arrival—of every arrival. This necessity, though, that takes the form of an imperative begs for more than one question. To begin with: what is a dream, indeed? What is dream-thought or dream language, as Derrida inquires elsewhere? (*Paper Machine* 168) And what does the dream have to do with giving or deconstruction? Why does deconstruction dream and, when it dreams, does it or can it dream of something other than death, of something other than the deconstruction of death?

The most comprehensive study aiming to answer the first question—"what is a dream?"—at the level of theory is, perhaps, Sigmund Freud's seminal work on *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In this long treatise published just before the dawn of the 20th century, Freud offers a well-defined outline of the admittedly vast—and, to this day, still quite uncharted—realm of dreaming. Writing against those of his contemporaries who firmly believed dreams to be "something alien arising from another world and contrasting with the remaining contents of the mind" (4), Freud extensively argues in favor of their worldliness, their intimacy, their mundaneness. Throughout his work, he treats dreams like symptoms, like little clues or indicators that reveal a condition the self already owns and from which it suffers without, however, necessarily being aware of the real conditions of its suffering. In his meticulous analysis, Freud distinguishes dream-work from dream-content—which he further divides into manifest and latent content—and he painstakingly illuminates, through various examples, an aspect of dreaming that is invaluable to his life-long practice of psychoanalysis: the fact that dreams have access to a much larger repository of thoughts and affects than the waking mind. They tap into the unconscious, drawing "on the remotest corners of the chambers of one's memory," unearthing, in the process, memories and experiences that have marked the psychic life of the subject in ways that the subject itself might ignore, repress, or suppress in the haze of day-to-day life (20).

Of all the distinguishing characteristics of dreams Freud points out in his work, two are of particular interest, at least for what we are trying to excavate here. The first one is their spontaneous character. As Freud aptly notices, dreams befall their dreamers. They emerge out of nowhere, without an invitation and without any further ado. Hence the German expression “*mir hat geträumt*,” meaning “I had a dream,” or, rather, “a *dream came to me*” (48, my emphasis). It is not the dreamer but the dream and the dream alone that decides the where and when of dreaming. What the dreamer does is nothing but *hold space* for whatever comes, allowing it to unfold in ways unpredicted and unpredictable. There is always, of course, a train of thought, as Freud repeatedly highlights, a chain of associations that can shed some light on the dream’s own reasoning and explain why, of all that exists within consciousness and unconsciousness alike, the dream chooses to recall a particular memory or thought and not another. Yet this train of thought is rarely obvious to the dreaming subject. So much so, that it cannot be grasped without the dream itself being remembered and accounted for, rigorously examined and analyzed by the subject the morning after. To understand one’s dreams, Freud teaches us, requires labor.

The other crucial and quite extraordinary characteristic of dreams that is of interest here is their strong preference for perception. As Freud notes early on in his monograph, dreams “think in images”—in images that are predominately but nevertheless *not exclusively* visual (49). Their content, for the most part, is expressed in the form of a “pictographic script” (277) that is punctuated by the occasional insertion of auditory, tactile, and even olfactory impressions, all of which find their way into our dream worlds. This sensorial richness and complexity that permeates dreams through and through is what makes them what they are: events that are almost impossible to grasp and disentangle. Events that can be easily mistaken for experiences. It is not until the dreamer is dragged out of sleep that these events are recognized as dreams; as the sophisticated illusions that they are, since, while sleeping, they feel real, as real as anything could ever be.

What is important to register here is precisely the fact that, even in their illusionary mist, dreams are, beyond any doubt, endowed in Freud’s work with an unexpected—and, admittedly, quite eccentric—kind of agency. They are not inventive, they depend entirely on the psyche and on the totality of the sensorial inputs, thoughts, and experiences that have gone into its making, they are incapable indeed of introducing something truly alien and foreign to the dreaming self, yet still, they are endowed with a certain kind of agency to

which the subject—the *conscious* subject—has no say whatsoever. This agency is revealed in the very words Freud chooses to talk about dreams. They “think in images,” he says, the presupposition being that, before anything else, dreams *think*. Like subjects or actants, perhaps, they do have an intention, and this intention, as he goes on to explain, is to first and foremost produce the condition that enables their appearance, their production and reproduction. This is why Freud sees dreams as “the *guardians* of sleep and not its disturbers” (233). The sudden, unexpected visitors of the night the psychoanalyst submits to critique arrive not to curtail but to prolong sleep, to afford themselves as much space and time as possible within the dreamer’s infinitely expanding world of illusionary perceptions, excavating, in the process, what the self most desires and presenting it in the form of a wish-fulfilling sequence of appearances that carves its vivid, lifelike impressions across the lethargic surface of the semi-conscious mind. Staging their content in a frequently condensed, displaced, distorted, and overdetermined but nevertheless quasi-realistic manner, as Freud contends, dreams give us in sleep a glimpse into a version of ourselves that has already attained what, in our waking life, we perceive to be unattainable. In so doing, they reserve the right to deceive us, even temporarily. They can trick us into believing them to be more than just impressions to the degree that, occasionally, it becomes impossible for the mind to tell whether it is the dream that bears the fragments of its memories or its memories that end up containing, in the aftermath of sleep, the distorted fragments of one’s dreams.

This inextricable intertwinement between memory and dream—an intertwinement Freud belabors throughout his voluminous study on the *Interpretation of Dreams*—is not merely an intellectual exercise in the art of learning to see the implicit and unacknowledged agency of the repressed or unrepressed thoughts, traumas, affects, and desires the psyche caringly tucks away from the subject’s immediate field of perception. Rather, all these notes on the nature of dreams, on their individual characteristics, on the mechanisms and content they have at their disposal are worthy of our attention because they can help us unpack what looms in the opaque—though not entirely concealed—horizon of giving as Derrida imagines it in “Ants.” If the gift *must* be given like a dream, as he insists, to understand what the gift is one *must* seriously consider all the encrypted and unencrypted references the dream as such entails, with one such reference being the reference to madness or “hysteria,” in Freud’s terms, and, by extension, a reference to

reason as well and to the epistemo-philosophical divide between the two—a divide which every gift worthy of the name transcends.

Freud draws indeed the parallel between hysterical phantasies and dreams in the *Interpretation*, yet the association of dreams with madness at large precedes Freud's work at least by a few centuries. Derrida not only acknowledges this precedence in his work but also challenges it in an essay he composed early in his career—an essay that quickly turned into a vigorous intellectual debate between him and Michel Foucault on the relation between madness and reason. This essay is none other than “Cogito and the History of Madness,” included in *Writing and Difference*. In it, Derrida responds to Foucault's reading of Descartes's famous *Meditations* in the *History of Madness*, and especially to his reading of the sharp distinction Descartes allegedly draws between reason and unreason in the first meditation. While so doing, Derrida offers us some of the most extensive and nuanced references to dreams that can be found in his work—references that can give us, in turn, a glimpse into the way he himself thinks about dreams and dream-work.

To understand Derrida's intervention, one has to begin with Foucault, who claims in his book that madness, in Descartes's most renowned and, perhaps, most important piece of writing, “is banished in the name of the man who doubts,” “placed in a zone of exclusion” that allows reason—and the reason of the Cogito in particular—to constitute itself as such (46). Descartes constructs his argument, Foucault insists, first by establishing the always already existing possibility of sensory errors within perception and then by considering this possibility alongside the experience of dreaming, which he parallels to that of insanity; from the very beginning, Descartes dismisses as irrelevant what he perceives to be outside the field of reason. To be fair, Foucault's reading is not entirely off the mark. In his first meditation, as he sits by the fire, Descartes indeed wonders “what reason could there be for doubting” that “these hands themselves and this whole body”—all of which he experiences through his senses—truly exist, concluding, in that same sentence, that such doubt is virtually impossible unless he were to compare himself “to one of those madmen” that experience, in their waking lives, a long sequence of misapprehensions instead of reality (13–14). He is too quick to dismiss, in other words, the possibility of madness *through* and *because* of thinking. For reason to exist, its possible enemies, which, for Descartes, “are errors and illusions” (Evangelou 192), have to be eliminated. What complicates, though, Foucault's critique is precisely that fact that such errors

and illusions include, for the most part, in Descartes's first meditation the world of dreaming.

In the paragraph that immediately follows the sentences Foucault examines, Descartes writes: "This is all very well, to be sure. But am I not a human being, and therefore in the habit of sleeping at night, when in my dreams I have all the same experiences as these madmen do when they are awake—or sometimes even stranger ones?" (14). This reference to dreams, Derrida argues, is what discredits Foucault's reading, since it destabilizes the presumably sharp distinction between reason and unreason that is (not) formulated in the first meditation. In this passage—a passage that Foucault excludes from his analysis—Descartes, as Derrida notes, "generalizes by hyperbole the hypothesis of sleep and dream," which, in turn, empties his previous conviction of its meaning (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 55). In dreams, according to these lines, "the *totality* of sensory images is illusory," hence whatever seemed to Foucault excluded "as insanity" from the realm of reason appears here perfectly "admissible within dreams" (58). It is not madness, in other words, but the much more frequent and universal experience of sleeping and dreaming that puts reason to the test—at least in Derrida's opinion—since it is in dreaming that "the *absolute totality* of ideas of sensory origin becomes suspect" and "is stripped of 'objective value'" (62).

The dream, for Derrida, is what challenges and even threatens reason from within. It is what introduces the possibility of incalculability and disorder within the finely calibrated, perfectly ordered minds of the sane and the philosophers.¹ This idiosyncratic character of the dream, its non-allegiance to reason, its proximity to madness is what makes the dream "hospitable," as Derrida notes, "to the demand for justice and to the most invincible of messianic hopes" (*Paper Machine* 174). It is because dreams exist, but not quite so prior to the dreamer's awakening (165); because they encourage us to "invent [our] own grammar" to make sense of their content (*Writing and Difference* 262); because they substitute for language at the time of its absence only to "vanish" back into darkness the moment "language awakens" (189); it is because they give us a glimpse into the unique and "irreplaceable" and the irreproducible, into "a truth or meaning that consciousness might hide from us on waking" (*Paper Machine* 167), that they constitute such an indispensable aspect of—if not the ineluctable supplement to—both the act of giving and to very possibility of political existence. The political cannot exist without the gift and the gift, in turn, cannot exist without dreaming.

To understand the interdependence between these notions, one need only look into Derrida's understanding of the gift, of what it is and is not, or rather of what it should be to be worthy of its name. In "A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event," Derrida writes:

Consider the gift. Giving should be an event. It has to come as a surprise, from the other or to the other; it has to extend beyond the confines of the economic circle of exchange. For giving to be possible, for a giving event to be possible, it has to look impossible. Why? If I give to the other in thanks or in exchange, giving has not taken place. If I'm expecting the other to thank me, to recognize my gift, and to give me something in return, in some way or another, symbolically, materially, or physically, there is no giving either. Even if the thanks are purely symbolic, they annul the giving. Giving has to overreach gratitude. To be able to receive the gift, in a certain way the other must not even know that I'm giving it, because once the person knows, then he or she enters the circle of thanks and gratitude and annuls the gift. Likewise, one could say that I must not even know that I'm giving. If I know I'm giving, I say to myself "here I am, giving a present"—and you see the connection between the present and the event. If I present myself as the giver, I'm already congratulating myself, thanking myself, feeling self-gratified for giving, and, consequently, the mere consciousness of giving annuls the gift. (448–49)

This passage reveals the aporetic—if not entirely paradoxical—structure of the gift, at least in Derrida's thinking. The nature of the gift, he argues, requires that it be impossible. Not in the sense that it cannot take place, but rather in the sense that, to be faithful to itself, the gift can never be *knowingly* given. It has to be offered without it ever being acknowledged or recognized, because the moment it is, the moment it is called a "gift" and identified as such, it ceases to be a gift. It is inscribed, instead, in an economy, into a circular system of symbolic or material exchange that elicits from the other—implicitly or explicitly—a response that takes the form either of a counter-gift or of gratitude, indebtedness, appreciation. To recognize and name the gift, in the context of this argument, is to taint it, to pave the way for its negation and annihilation. Very much like the dream, the gift must transcend the conventional boundaries of intention, reciprocity, and societal expectation, and even of language. It must take place beyond language, in a realm governed by its absence, and, as soon as words reawaken from their slumber, the true gift must vanish back into the darkness of the undefined and the inexpressible. It must protect itself from the violence of naming, of determination and

calculation since, to be a gift, it must remain incalculable. This is why the gift, “if there is any,” as Derrida writes elsewhere, “will always be without border” (*Given Time* 91). A gift contained within the limits of determination “is prey to calculation and measure” and, therefore, unfaithful to itself, which forever drives it toward the limitless, the “measureless and the excessive” (91). In Derrida’s rich and multilayered vocabulary, it is another name for the event. Unforeseen and unforeseeable, it disrupts the present. It inserts itself in both space and time in ways that interrupt “the course of history,” allowing for something else, for something different to emerge out of what seems to be a predictable—if not entirely mundane—sameness (“Impossible Possibility” 448-49).

And it must be that way not only for the one who stands at the receiving end of the gift, but also for the one who gives it. The true gift is the one that finds the way to evade even the giving self’s own structure of recognition, in the sense that the true gift can never be the one that is being given for one to take pride in the act of giving, to present oneself as the selfless and benevolent provider. To avoid being caught in the orbit of recognition and exchange, therefore, to save itself from the weight of obligatory reciprocity, the gift “must be given like a dream” indeed, as Derrida argues, which is to say almost unconsciously. It must emerge at the very margin of consciousness, somewhere in between the spontaneous and the deliberate, the already decided and the undecidable. It must befall both the conferrer and the recipient alike suddenly and unreservedly—madly perhaps. It must arrive without an invitation, without it ever being asked for, expected, or even discussed in the first place, without a notice and even without delay. Like any other event, the gift can never be too early or too late. It will always be timely, as timely as anything could ever be, as much as it will always remain unconditional. To be itself, the gift is destined to break away from the circle of resentment and revenge and, at the same time, from that of gratitude and thanks too. Hence the need to “forgive the gift,” as Derrida writes in “Ants.” There is no gift that does not seal an apology or the promise of an apology within it. Every act of giving that wishes to give and give itself up is countersigned with a “forgive me”—forgive me for giving this to you, for imparting whatever it is that I am offering to you; forgive me for entrusting this to your hands without letting you know in advance, without asking for your permission, and without you ever requesting it or expecting to receive it, while every act of receiving, in turn, must contain within itself an “I forgive you”—for giving, in general, and for giving *to me* in particular. The only

expectation that lies—or must lie—at the heart of the gift is that of forgetting, essentially—of “forgetting of what you give, to whom, why and how, of what you remember about it or hope. A gift, if there is one, does not [and must not] destine itself,” as Derrida writes elsewhere (Malabou and Derrida 120).

The true gift, if there is any, is that which withholds itself as it is being given. It neither announces nor names itself, but renounces each and every tie to knowledge—let alone absolute knowledge—because the moment it assumes knowledge of what is being offered and to whom, it immediately inscribes itself in the economy of transparency, totality, and calculation and, by so doing, it negates itself and ceases to exist. This is why it must be given like a dream, as in a dream, as Derrida notes. “And if one can only give in dream,” the passage continues, “one can only dream of giving. Even so, this requires the unchangeable and inexchangeable grace of certain dreams. Even so, one must know how to dream. *Enough to outwit the miserly circle of absolute knowledge*” (“Ants” 20, my emphasis). To give, and to give anything in the form of a gift, one *must* know how to dream, how to dream in ways that outwit, escape, and perhaps even invalidate the circle of absolute knowledge. Very much like dreaming, giving requires educating oneself in the art of sitting comfortably in the absence of all and every knowledge. It requires learning how to keep whatever is being given uncontaminated by the infectious logic of exchange that threatens to transform it into yet another transactional encounter between the parties involved—an encounter that takes place in anticipation of a response, of a gesture that matches the force of its initial traction. It is—or must be—an act of mutual forgetting for those who are caught in the orbit of its presence to the point that, in both word and deed, in discourse and in praxis, the gift continuously finds itself in the process of becoming another name for the secret.

In Part One of *The Gift of Death*, speaking of gift as an event and not a thing, Derrida writes: “The gift is the secret itself, if the secret *itself* can be told. Secrecy is the last word of the gift which is the last word of the secret” (29–30). Suggesting, at the very beginning of the book, that what makes the gift what it is lies precisely in its hidden or unknowable nature, Derrida introduces here—as he does in other places across his work—the question of effability and expressibility. Could the secret ever be disclosed? Could words ever encapsulate it? Would language—any language—ever be enough to bring forth its meaning in its entirety? And if the secret marks, as he states, the limit of the gift and the gift stands at the limit of secrecy, could the gift ever exist in a state other than that of opacity, concealment, and ungraspability? Probably

not, the rest of the book contends. Through a close reading of Abraham's decision to unquestioningly abide by God's will and sacrifice his son while keeping this a secret from his wife, Sarah, Derrida unearths and foregrounds the relay between secrecy, faith, and responsibility. Presupposing and even demanding a deeply personal entanglement with the other—and with the absolute other that God represents here—faith, as Derrida argues, is inherently secretive. Not only because it establishes a unique and irreplaceable relation between the believer and the divine, a relation that can never be fully explained, put to words, or conveyed to those who look at it from a distance, but also because it requires, on the part of the believer, the shouldering of a duty, of an absolute duty that might as well transcend all other ethical obligations the subject has assumed in the name of being-with others. Such is the paradox of faith. It requires a commitment to something or someone that is beyond rationalization, beyond any explanation or public accountability, yet a commitment that has the supreme claim over all other commitments one has made. Hence its inherent secrecy. What faith is, more than anything else, is a responsibility that cannot be shared, deciphered, or justified—even to the believing self—but a responsibility that demands to be addressed nevertheless, even in secret or, perhaps, solely, completely, inevitably in secret. To have faith in the other is to trust them entirely, to respond to whatever they might ask or expect of you without any further questions or doubts, and it is to give unreservedly, even if this requires one to perform a sacrifice as ultimate as the one God expects from Abraham.

Although seemingly trivial or too intellectual to apply to anything besides philosophy, this conversation on faith, secrecy, and the gift is, in fact, central not only to *The Gift of Death*, but to Derrida's work at large. Secrecy and the possibility of secrecy is essential, in his view, for the political to exist in the first place. From his early essays in *The Margins of Philosophy* to *Rogues*, *Paper Machine*, *Of Hospitality* and *The Politics of Friendship*, and even to his seminars on *The Death Penalty*, Derrida time and again returns to the secret, whose gravitational force is what allows democracy to stay in its orbit. As he writes in *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, "it is necessary also in politics to respect the secret, that which exceeds the political or that which is no longer in the juridical domain. This is what I would call the 'democracy to come'" (55). Death and suffering, of course, belong in that order, in the constellation of things or non-things that the juridical domain can neither approach nor appropriate, which is why, of all the secrets literature contains, the one Derrida distinguishes is that of Oedipus. The secret concerning his

death and the “clandestine site” of his death, as he calls it, is what grants Theseus’s Athens the right to call itself a democracy (*Of Hospitality* 99). To protect the vulnerable, to give them shelter and the right to speak without forcing language on them, and to protect their secrets regardless of the potential consequences this might entail for us is what makes us capable, in Derrida’s view, of living-with, of existing politically in the most intimate sense of the word.

What this close and cumulative reading of the rich—and almost inexhaustible—entanglement between the dream, the secret, and the gift encourage us to think, especially when read in relation to Derrida’s late work, is of yet another link that inescapably emerges. If we are willing to take Derrida’s words seriously, and if we are willing to read them contextually, then there is only one thing or non-thing that can, with certainty, be given indeed like a dream, as in a dream. This thing or non-thing, which exceeds all borders, arrives without a notice, like a dream, in the form of an image—be it visual or not—is nothing more and nothing less than the act of witnessing. In all his late, more explicitly political writings, Derrida keeps returning to the question of the witness, provoking us to stay with the trouble of this word in the hope that this constant renegotiation will eventually enrich our understanding of the word and of the act itself, but also of ourselves. In *Sovereignities in Question*, where he offers his most comprehensive published meditation of bearing witness, Derrida writes:

When testimony appears guaranteed and then becomes a demonstrable theoretical truth, part of a legal proceedings or report, a substantiation of evidence or even a piece of evidence, it risks losing its value, its sense or its status as testimony...*as soon as it is guaranteed, certain as a theoretical proof, a testimony can no longer be guaranteed as testimony...*For it to be guaranteed as testimony, it cannot, it must not, be absolutely certain, absolutely sure and certain in the order of knowing as such. This paradox of *as such* is the paradox we can experience—and there is nothing fortuitous about this—apropos of the secret and responsibility, of the secret of responsibility and the responsibility of the secret...*bearing witness is not proving...*What do I mean when I say “I bear witness” (for one only bears witness in the first person)? I do not mean “I prove,” but “I swear that I saw, I heard, I touched, I felt, I was *present*...and although you do not have access to it, not the same access, you, my addressees, *you have to believe me*, because I engage myself to tell you the truth, I am already engaged in it, I tell you that I am telling you the truth. Believe me. You have to believe me.” (68)

There is more than one thing worth discussing here but let us follow the threads that will let us stay close to dreaming and the gift. What makes the testimony a testimony, in Derrida's words here, is precisely the fact that it is not, *cannot* be guaranteed. In theory, it could function as proof, yet the moment it acquires the evidentiary force demanded by the court—any court—it risks becoming something other than a testimony. This impossibility to guarantee the testimony is not only linked to its etymology—from the Latin *testis*, meaning witness or the third person standing by—but also and primarily to what, for Derrida, constitutes an indispensable aspect of the very possibility of living-with: faith. Not in its theological, divine or messianic sense, but in its most mundane and most political sense instead: faith *in the other*. Not in language or even in the *language* of the other; in the other *qua* other, since bearing witness, as the passage unfailingly points out, is not always and not necessarily a discursive act. Sometimes it is silent, an act that “engage[s] something of the body, which has no right to speak” (77). Witnessing can live in the absence of language and, in fact, a part of it always does so. Even when the witness speaks, there is a part—and arguably a substantial one—of his or her experience that never makes it to the outside, to the realm of language and articulation, of absolute knowledge and calculation. Bearing witness is not proving and it is *not* persuading or even trying to persuade either. When a witness confides to their addressees that which they have already experienced, that of which their body already bears the material traces, they do not speak to persuade. They speak to make the experience legible without for a moment thinking that they have to prove the eventuality of the event, the having happened of whatever it is they witnessed. The moment they do, the moment they speak to persuade or the moment they are asked to speak for the sake of persuasion, it is already late for the testimony, too late.

Like the dream, the testimony is an experience removed from the immediacy of the present. For the witness “is not *present*...presently present, to what he recalls” (*Sovereignities* 76). The witness recalls from memory. They testify to something that already belongs to the past and they are trying, through language, to resurrect it. Like dreamers, witnesses are thrust at the time of testimony into a world that is at once alien and one's own, a world that inescapably involves occasional displacements, condensations, or slight distortions, all of which are inherent characteristics of memory itself. Yet, in the moment of witnessing, witnesses are expected to paint an image for the outsiders—an image that resembles reality as closely as possible, no matter

how traumatic remembering can be. They are expected to put in language what they often possess in material traces, in scars and wounds, in sensorial inputs that have irretrievably altered, de- and re-constituted them as subjects.

Not all witnesses are treated the same way, though. There are witnesses whose memories and language are trusted by the courts as much as they are trusted by popular opinion. It is certain witnesses, who own skins darker than white, who dress in ways that seem foreign to Western eyes and address God using names other than those cited in the Bible—witnesses of the most despicable humanitarian disasters of our times, of war, famine, and genocidal violence, who frequently knock on Europe’s doors seeking refuge that are treated by the law—by Western law—exactly like dreamers: like the potential deceivers of an audience that seeks proof behind their words instead of simply giving them the space and time they need to be heard, instead of giving them the gift of speech and language, of being present and bearing witness to their testimony.² Against the rhetoric of fear that perpetuates the discourse of counterfeit testimony and lie, following Derrida’s thought, we can respond precisely by saying: do displacement, condensation and distortion ever prevent anyone from giving space to one’s dreams? Or does the possibility of being deceived by them disqualify dreams from being the communicators of important messages? Does this ever-present possibility of deceit reduce dreams’ capacity to bring to the surface thoughts, affects, and experiences that, although sealed in the depths of our psychic being, are as real as anything we see, or touch, or hear while awake?

More than ever before, in the 21st century we are in dire need of renegotiating our relation and response to the question of testimony and witness. Proliferating wars, increasingly augmenting economic unevenness, and humanly induced ecological derangement are only some of the reasons that trigger mass and often irregular migration, which results in tremendous loss and suffering. To be on the move clandestinely is neither enjoyable nor easy. Exhaustion, starvation, rape and systematic brutalization are just a fragment of the hardships that await those who flee their home when home has become “the barrel of a gun” (Shire 27). To arrive at a zone of safety and to have one’s experience and trauma challenged or dismissed on the premise of potential counterfeit testimony is, at the very least, yet another shape and form brutalization can take. It is, in fact, the shape and form that brutalization takes in the civilized and ever-civilizing West, where rights exist, as the narrative goes, but only for those who hold a passport that allows them to claim them. However, even for these select few of humanity, the claim to rights

is becoming debatable, the more neoliberalism advances. What Derrida's proposition can teach us, in this climate of intensifying uncertainty, is exactly what it says. If the gift must be given like a dream, if it must exceed all desire for absolute knowledge and surrender itself to opacity, and if it must remain outside the economy of exchange and calculation, then the only gift that could ever possibly be given *as a gift* is the act of bearing witness—to oneself and to the other; the act of being present to collect, preserve and document the traces of the other's experience.

This bearing witness of which I am speaking, of course, is necessarily bound to secrecy and faith. First and foremost, because, as Paul Celan puts it in a poem that Derrida extensively discusses, "No one bears witness for the witness" (Derrida, *Sovereignties* 67). The only one who knows, the only one who is capable of testifying, is the one whose body has registered the event both corporeally and affectively. Everyone else can merely provide annotations to the account this primary witness can give, and even then, even when the witness himself or herself is able and allowed to speak, language, as Derrida time and again argues, is not enough, never enough to fully convey the experience as such. And secondly, because, even when witnessing occurs in the third person, it involves a secret, implicit contract between the one who is immediately affected and the one who witnesses, the one who knows, who sees or hears the result of the other's suffering (or joy). As the impossible gift that arrives like a dream, suddenly and even unconsciously, without announcing itself, without it ever being asked or mentioned in advance, bearing witness, as Derrida imagines it, marks the beginning of a politics and ethics of opacity, of unconditional acceptance and responsibility, of openness to whomever and whatever comes. It is a gift irreducible to all instrumentalization and appropriation and a gift that demands the same devotion one exhibits in faith. It must always begin and end with an affirmation, with a short and simple, but nevertheless substantial sentence: "I believe you."

With no asterisks, ifs, or maybes, without questioning, putting to the test, or countering your statement, without attempting to negate your language or superimpose mine, I, my witness, who was not present, believe you. I bequeath language and I bequeath my faith to you—to you who are capable of deceiving me, but are, at the same time, engaging yourself in telling the truth. I, who was not present, do not expect your words to be my evidence. I, who was not present, do not expect any evidence at all, because the moment I do, the moment I ask for proof, it is already late—too late, perhaps (for both

of us). I, who was not present, bequeath my presence now to you, and I am here to register whatever you wish to tell or show me, whatever you have to share, acknowledging that I have already failed, because I did not spare you the disaster, I did not spare you death. I, who was not present, believe you, and I am asking you to forgive me—forgive me for this gift that I am giving you, for this gift that you never expected and even wanted in the first place. Forgive me for the only gift that I could ever possibly give you *as a gift*, because I know that it is a gift that marks at once the beginning and end of the political, a secret between the two of us that registers the ultimate success and absolute failure of our being-with, since it is all we have left when every other structure and institution, when every other network of support has failed us both.

If deconstruction dreams of death, if it dreams “to have done with death, to deconstruct death itself,” it does so for no reason other than this: like a letter missing a sender but always destined to an addressee, irreducible to language, final and irreversible, death is the secret of secrets.³ It is the gift that is being given at the beginning of a life—of any life—way before it eventually arrives, the incalculable in the face of which all subsequent calculations must take place. There is no response and responsibility, no word or deed, no gift, no dream or secret, no witnessing, no hospitality and forgiveness, no being-with that could ever possibly exist in the absence of death. This thing or non-thing, this secret of secrets that we all know without knowing, is what gives us the command to witness. For as long as death exists (which is to say forever), and for as long as it arrives prematurely through despicable violence for certain communities and people that are disproportionately exposed to it, being present, documenting and, above all, believing those who suffer it is not a choice but an obligation that demands to be assumed by all those who enjoy the immense privilege of watching catastrophes piling up at a distance.

Notes

¹ Derrida takes up the question in the final sections of *Rogues*, too, where he critiques the notion of teleology inscribed in the history of Western reason. Arguing against reason’s tendency to structure all the systems it invents around a universal idea of the world toward which all historical events lead, Derrida calls for a rethinking of reason that would make room for the incalculable and the unforeseeable. He calls for a form of reason structured around what he calls “the unconditional event,” namely

a form of reason open to radical singularity and unpredictability, an Enlightenment-to-come that will eventually, upon its arrival, “save the honor of reason.”

- ² See Mina Karavanta’s essay “On Behalf of Vulnerable Strangers’: Interpreting communities-to-come,” included in Mabel Moraña’s *Liquid Borders: Migration as Resistance*, where Karavanta offers a detailed example of whose testimony counts as reliable in the court of law and whose has to be appealed before it is even recognized as credible. It is no secret that Europe’s border policies over the last two decades have systematically left thousands of undesirable migrants and refugees, as the narrative goes, drown in the Mediterranean for reasons that Karavanta very succinctly analyzes in her essay.
- ³ In lack of space, I have not discussed in this essay at all the relation between neoliberal capitalism and dreaming. However, Jonathan Crary’s *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* is a book I consider indispensable to this discussion, because in it Crary explains in detail capitalism’s desire to do away with sleep, to conquer this last frontier that prevents us all from being 24/7 workers and consumers. As the by-products of sleep, dreams are important not only because they actively involve the imaginary but also because they are inextricably intertwined with the break, with the great repose sleep necessarily inserts into the otherwise hectic rhythm of life neoliberalism imposes to maximize its profits.

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