

On Not Being Forgivable: Four Meditations on Europe, Islam and the 'New World Order'¹

Andrew Gibson

I too think it quite certain that a real change in the relations of human beings to possessions would be of more help...than any ethical commands. (Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*)

In order not to be paralysed with shame I have had to live a life of getting over the worse. What I cannot get over any more is that *getting over*. (Coetzee, *Age of Iron*)

Here's what I'd like you to write: I'm proud of the part of me that isn't European. I'm proud of the things in me that Europeans find childish, cruel and primitive. If the Europeans are beautiful, I want to be ugly; if they're intelligent, I prefer to be stupid; if they're modern, let me stay simple. (Pamuk, *Snow*)

I began this essay on July 11th 2005, four days after the terrorist attacks in London, where I live. There can be no case for forgiving the bombers. It is unthinkable that one should recommend it to the surviving victims or the relatives of the dead. They could hardly begin to imagine it. Nor could I, had my son been killed. So much is morally obvious, and needs no emphasis. Nonetheless, the question everywhere at stake in my essay is whether the (undoubted) unforgivability of the terrorist is as much a matter of our sense of the self-evidence of a principle of justice as we are told we should think. Amidst all the familiar expressions of outrage in the days after the bombings, one voice alone stood out: that of the ex-CIA agent (of all people) who suggested that the situation that had produced the bombings would hardly change until the West understood that it must change its language. It is not clear that the idea of intellectual responsibility still has any serious meaning. None the less: if it does still signify, if the idea of the intellectual in any serious sense of that word, and of the burden he or she might wish to assume, can still be conjured with, it is perhaps in relation to a rigorous practice of complication on the one hand, and the (necessarily arduous and exacting) elaboration and dissemination of an ethical language on the other. The two tasks are closely linked. The language in question would be rare and new: that is, as far as possible, distinct, not only from the "ethical" languages currently in circulation, not least in political circles, but, more contentiously, from the dominant languages of the postmodern ethics of difference. The character of such a language must remain unforeseeable and unpredictable. But the major contemporary novelists — Morrison, Coetzee, Sebald, Pamuk — have struggled to supply it or, at least, to sustain a liminal conception of it. They in some degree provide a model for contemporary intellectual work.

However obliquely and elliptically at times, this essay pleads for a closer scrutiny, both of our conviction of justice, and of the language in which we articulate it. The word 'fanaticism' seems peculiarly impoverished. Young men and women are destroying others by immolating themselves:

¹ I specify Europe in my title, as does the quotation from Pamuk's *Snow*; as indeed, both Pamuk and Jambet's work, insofar as it treats of the West, is almost exclusively concerned with a relation specifically between Europe and Islam. Despite all the recent abject political efforts in the UK, I would not want to identify what is at stake in the European too closely with what is at stake in the American relation to Islam, still less with what has been at stake in Israel's relation to it since Sharon came to power. Islam has long been Europe's neighbour, as it has not been America's. For all the geographical and historical differences in question, I hope that American readers will not find themselves excluded by my 'we'. In any case, my focus is necessarily and deliberately very unsteady, and even within the first few lines the strictly mythical notion of 'the West' appears. The unsteadiness has its own very specific significance. By Europe, I mean fortress Europe in the sense in which Jacques Rancière defines it in 'L'inadmissible'. See *Aux bords du politique* (Paris: La Fabrique, 1998), pp. 128-47. Here what Rancière calls a 'disenchanted rationality' proposes a kind of local and separate justice which distinguishes acceptable forms of misery, marginalization and disempowerment which it can address from unencompassable ones which it cannot. It thus proceeds on the basis of a 'savage ontology' made evident precisely in its concepts of admissibility and inadmissibility. The Islamic world becomes a segment of the new *proletarii*, those not to be admitted within the walls of triumphant Rome. The new *proletarii* are in one sense excluded in a classification, reduced to a singular and monolithic entity precisely so that they can be held at bay. The relevance of the contemporary question of the inclusion of Turkey in Europe is clear here. I touch on it later.

what drives them to do so must be extraordinarily remote from our habitual frames of reference. As Christian Jambet makes clear, it would be mistaken to suggest that Ismaeli messianism and the Assassins of Alamut provide a forecast of modern terrorism.² But the parallels are sufficiently close and significant to indicate how foreign the domain in question might be.³ It is worth at least supposing that the motive of present-day suicide bombers — however indefensible its consequences — may be a passionate conviction of the need to call what they take to be the unjust powers to radical account. Hence my concern in the following four short meditations is not principally with the unforgivability of the terrorist, but rather with the persuasion of the excited young man at the political meeting in Orhan Pamuk's *Snow* that I began by quoting.⁴ The young man is not a terrorist, but it is easy to imagine him becoming one. He speaks on behalf of a culture profoundly convinced that it has been spurned, that it has been historically abandoned to its fate by another that is in fact patently more ignoble than itself. Bearing in mind that, in the phrase of Jacques Rancière, 'toute la misère du monde, nul n'est tenu de l'accueillir',⁵ that no-one can assume the burden of the world's misery, it is worth asking, all the same, whether the contemporary Western project must find itself, in truth, ultimately, inexorably doomed to the charge of historical unforgivability.

If so, what may in retrospect appear to have doomed it is a failure that was also conspicuous in late imperial Rome: the will to insouciance, freedom from care.

i) Insofar as an idea of adequacy is appropriate to the demand of the Other, can the ethical subject indeed prove adequate to that demand? It is by no means evident that the Other does indeed command us from a height; in which case, ethics cannot really be first philosophy. If the Other commands us from a height, our carelessness becomes the more perplexing. We slight the desert beyond the security of our citadels in which the Other is ceaselessly deprived, suffers and dies so that we may live as we do. The pure but unheeded necessity is, not only that a road-map must prevail, but that the desert itself no longer exist. For as long as it exists, no 'postmodern ethics' is possible. Lacan's admonition is resonant: "there is no satisfaction...outside the satisfaction of all".⁶

How was it supposed that the Other could command me from a height? For Levinas, in the encounter with alterity, the Other definitively overflows, is in excess of the frames within which my ego, powers of cognition, consciousness or intuition would seek to contain him, or her. The Other always proliferates beyond my sphere of reference, which therefore disintegrates. Levinas might be thought of as classically modern, here: what must be demonstrated, as, say, Proust and D.H. Lawrence seek to demonstrate it, is the baselessness of the dream of possession of the Other. In the very failure — the necessary failure — to possess the Other, the structure in which I sought to ensnare him or her is laid bare. It is exposed as a resistance to complexity, to multifariousness, to *dimension* — inseparable from my will to be myself, to persist as myself, to flourish and to prosper in and as what I am, to bunker down in my properties. On the one hand, what is at stake is a repetition compulsion that, as 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' tells us, tends in the direction of mineral inertia. On the other hand, what is also at issue is my sense of entitlement to my patch, the space, materials and resources to which (I suppose) I with justice stake my claim. Levinas repeatedly returns to a phrase of Pascal's: what ethics most radically calls in question is my conviction of my right to a place in the sun, my right to bask carelessly in its warmth.

We know the structure of the Levinasian experience of ethics, but it is worth briefly rehearsing it again. As my imperiously assertive self undergoes the failure of its drive to enclose the

² See Christian Jambet, *La grande résurrection d'Alamût: Les formes de la liberté dans le shî'isme ismaélien* (Paris: Verdier, 1990), pp. 27-29. Jambet tells us that he is disputing the claims of Bernard Lewis. For a recent version of Lewis's argument, see 'Preface', *The Assassins: A Radical Sect of Islam* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2001), pp. viii-x.

³ For a relevant discussion, see Jambet, 'Introduction', *La grande resurreccion*, pp. 9-32.

⁴ See Orhan Pamuk, *Snow*, tr. Maureen Freely (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 285.

⁵ 'L'inadmissible', p. 146. All translations from French are my own, except where otherwise specified.

⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-60*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, tr. with notes by Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 292. I have omitted the words 'for the individual'. In this context, I also mean the phrase to apply to a limited interest or a specific civilization or culture.

Other, so I recognize the violence that is intrinsic to that drive. The encounter with the Other strips away the mystifications by which I aim to disguise my own violence from myself. It produces what Levinas calls a 'dégrisement', a disenchantment, specifically, a 'disenchantment of subjectivity'.⁷ The failure of my will to possession makes of the encounter an occasion to which I must rise for a second time. I now no longer hope to reduce the Other to my terms. I rather offer myself to the other, respond to and become responsible for him or her. The Other is now a drastically sobering antidote to what Levinas calls self-intoxication.⁸ It undermines the fantasy of sovereignty entertained by my ego and draws me into social life, dialogue, persuades me of the need for generosity of spirit. In it lies the possibility of rescue from what is otherwise the 'cynical' mode of life.⁹ Marxism once challenged liberal idealism and its promotion of the autonomous self, thus breaking the 'harmonious curve' of the development of European culture.¹⁰ Now it is ethics that must bear the burden of that task. I take this thought to underlie much of what has recently been known as postmodern ethics.

Alain Badiou has summarily and, I think, devastatingly interrogated the Levinasian structure as a sufficient foundation for such an ethics.¹¹ There is no great difficulty in seeing where the problem lies: it is not clear why the failure of the subject's first encounter with the Other should of necessity lead to the second. The logic at stake is undeclared. Badiou exposes it with simple, brilliant clarity: it is and can only be theological. What is it that ineluctably enjoins my devotion to the Other? Why do I find myself yielding to him, or her?

The Other, as he appears to me in the order of the finite, must be the epiphany of a properly infinite instance to the other, the traversal of which is the originary ethical experience.

This means that in order to be intelligible, ethics requires that the Other be in some sense carried by a principle of alterity which transcends mere finite experience. Levinas calls this principle the 'Altogether-Other' and it is quite obviously the ethical name for God. There can be no Other if he is not the immediate phenomenon of the Altogether-Other. There can be no finite devotion to the non-identical if it is not sustained by the infinite devotion of the principle to that which subsists outside it. There can be no ethics without God the ineffable.¹²

However concealed as such, ethics, says Badiou, is always a species of pious discourse. Without piety, no ethics.

We might be inclined to assume the self-evidently post-theological character of our world. Badiou makes no such assumption. Keenly aware of the drive within postmodernism towards obscurantism, of a culture inclined to turn back on its steps, he not only firmly and rightly commits

⁷ See Emmanuel Levinas, *La mort et le temps* (Paris: L'Herne, 1991), p. 25; and my *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 25-26.

⁸ See Levinas, *La mort*, *ibid.*

⁹ See *Collected Philosophical Papers*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1993), p. 25.

¹⁰ See *Les imprévus de l'histoire*, preface de Pierre Hayat (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1994), pp. 33-34.

¹¹ Given my argument, here, I should perhaps make clear how I now read *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel*. I do not dissent from very much in it — certainly not the readings of texts. The book sought to promote a postmodern ethics of fiction. Like Thomas Docherty's, my understanding of postmodernism was very much Lyotard's (postmodernism as a continuation and acceleration of modernism), not the competing definition (postmodernism as the cultural dominant of the social-democratic phase of neo-liberalism). That battle has now been lost. More crucially, I would now also concede that it is not possible to read Levinas in the mode of 'atheist transcendence', as Simon Critchley and I both sought to in the nineties. In that sense, I would ideally want to recast some of the discourse in my book. The shift in my thought has of course been very precisely historically determined. Some of the factors 1999-2006 should be self-evident to many readers. Some, like the dismayingly swift conflation of English postmodernism with the "culture" of New Labour, may not be.

¹² Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, tr. with an introd. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), p. 22.

himself to renewing the strictly necessary conviction of the great modern 'destroyers' that thought only begins on the further side of religion.¹³ He also takes up their work of destruction again; that is, he is not only atheistic, but militantly atheistic. In 'Dieu est mort', he is starkly clear: firstly, the 'living God' of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is definitively dead. Claims to have encountered him are merely psychosocial manifestations, symptoms of a pathological condition. At the popular level, contemporary religion is just simulation, 'theatre', *doxa*, a pitiful State formation (ibid.). Secondly, the God of speculative metaphysics, Spinoza's God, was never really alive in the first place. He was a source of meaning and truth and, as such, an instrument in the rationalist war on the living God. God is dead.¹⁴ yet as long as finitude remains the ultimate determination of *Dasein*, God remains as its unnameable or unattainable horizon, and we ourselves remain prey to nostalgia. Modern mathematics, however, can cleanse us of God and nostalgia together. For it makes thinkable an actually existing, accessible infinity, and thus effects a 'radical desacralization' of eternity (CS, p. 164). It brings to an end the post-Hegelian and post-romantic conception of infinity as a boundless exteriority, an openness without end, which always threatens to reintroduce the theological principle. With modern mathematics, the deconstructive insistence on the vestiges of piety becomes obsolete.

It is to Levinas, says Badiou, that we owe our current fashion of 'ethical radicalism'.¹⁵ Levinas is the very root of the "recognition of the other", respect for alterity, the "ethics of difference", "multiculturalism", even the return to 'good old-fashioned "tolerance"'.¹⁶ However, without the theological sanction, the logic of these concepts collapses. Violence of thought has always defeated tolerance in advance. On the one hand, the ethical postmodern subject will always be left to weep quietly as the Rumsfelds and Cheney's of the world continue their operations. On the other hand, we have the extraordinary contemporary phenomenon of liberal coercion, whereby postmodern ethics expeditiously becomes law in order that it should not abruptly reveal its own groundlessness. This is Agamben's lesson: no ethics can survive without foundations save by invoking some form of sovereign decree. This leaves us in an apparently issueless predicament that is the determining condition for every ethical theme, including forgiveness. Forgiveness involves the abrogation of a demand made by the ego. If we follow Agamben and Badiou, it is evident that no plausible or durable mechanism of forgiveness arises or can arise from postmodern ethics, save in a particular, hypocritical form. We are certainly seeing enough of this hypocrisy around us.

We might specify, as Badiou does not, what remains of the Levinasian structure once we have done with the 'Altogether-Other'. The question, here, is why the collapse of the Levinasian logic of ethics necessarily entails the triumph of violence. Levinas described his work as a whole as directed against the Spinozan *conatus essendi*.¹⁷ The key definition of the *conatus* is implicit in the sixth proposition in the third book of Spinoza's *Ethics*: 'Each thing, in so far as it is in itself, endeavours [*conatur*] to persevere in its being'.¹⁸ The *conatus* is precisely this work of persistence in self-assertion. For Spinoza, no virtue can be conceived' as prior to it (E4, P3), and it is 'the first and unique basis of

¹³ The term is Derrida's. See Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference*, tr. with an introd. and additional notes by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), pp. 351-70, pp. 354-56, especially at p. 356. Derrida specifies Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger.

¹⁴ Lacan's declaration to this effect is at least as important to Badiou as Nietzsche's. See Lacan, *Seminar Book VII*, p. 292.

¹⁵ Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 18.

¹⁶ Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 20.

¹⁷ It is interesting to note that Badiou, too, not only engages with the Spinozan theory of the *conatus*, but takes it to be in some sense definitive of human being without a saving grace (for Levinas, ethics, for Badiou, truth). See for instance *Ethics*, p. 46, 53. Badiou's concept of truth as the consequence of the *alea* has no theological dimension. Interestingly again, however, a world without truth would not exactly meet with moral disaster, as would Levinas's world without the Altogether-Other. It would rather be a world of no account. I reflect on this at length in my reading of Badiou in *Beckett and Badiou: The Pathos of Intermittency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming in 2006).

¹⁸ Spinoza, *Ethics*, ed. and tr. G.H.R. Parkinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 171.

virtue' (E4 P22).¹⁹ As sheer desire to persist,²⁰ to claim one's right to a place in the sun, the *conatus* may indeed be inseparable from self-sameness, from what Thomas Docherty has called the identity-principle.²¹ But it is not that principle itself. It must in some sense be thought of as prior to subjectivity, and therefore as not caught up in or problematized by postmodern deconstructions of the subject.²² This is one way of understanding the impasse at which postmodern ethics has quickly arrived. Nothing will dismantle the *conatus* from within. In Spinoza's terms, it is only an exterior force that can hinder persistence in being. Indeed, '[t]he force by which a man perseveres in existence is limited, and is infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes' (E4 P3).²³ But the Spinozan ethical subject is hardly overpowered by the obstacles in question. For the *conatus* is in itself an expression of the power of God. Levinas's radical move is precisely to reverse the identification of the *conatus* with God. God is the obstacle: the Altogether-Other now blocks or inhibits the *conatus*. Subtract the Altogether-Other from a structure from which Spinoza's divine monad has already vanished, and it should be clear what we are left with. 'Appetite', writes Spinoza, 'is nothing other than the very essence of man' (E3 P9).²⁴ As Levinas himself well knows, in Spinozan terms, freedom (*libertas*) is the condition of being true to the *conatus*, successful persistence in one's being. If we take Levinas's Altogether-Other out of his equation, what remains is the world as a manifestation of universal appetite.

ii) This might appear to be obvious. But of course we both know it and do not know it, know it and resist our knowledge. The century of disaster has left us weary of staring at the Gorgon: hence the current flight back to theologies and neo-theologies. Hence, too, what Badiou has rightly identified as the massive contemporary return to Kant.²⁵ Our ambivalence is surely evident in our displaced but irrepressible, recurrent disgust with ourselves in the form of the democratic politicians we democratically elect, and who represent us. The liberal and postmodern-liberal ruse is to shift responsibility: it was the other that elected them, not me. But the dinner-table declamation does not finally show how clean my hands are. It rather demonstrates the reverse, that I cannot erase my own complicity or forget that my will to dis-identification has certain apparently insurmountable limits.²⁶ In a Spinozan gloss, those limits are determined by the imperiousness of the *conatus*.

The great account of the logic at stake in this ethical switchback still seems to me to come in the fifth chapter of Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, and Lacan's meditation on it in the fourteenth

¹⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 230.

²⁰ More than 'appetite' or 'will', desire is Spinoza's most frequent term for the *conatus* in its human aspect.

²¹ Thomas Docherty, *After Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996). See in particular 9.1, pp. 245-53.

²² Cf. the Spinozan critique of *akrasia*, weakness of will, as a problem that should in principle be overcome.

²³ Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 230.

²⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 172.

²⁵ 'What essentially is retained from Kant...is the idea that there exists formally representable imperative demands that are to be subjected neither to empirical considerations nor to the examination of situations; that these imperatives apply to cases of offence, of crime, of Evil....' *Ethics*, p. 8. What price deconstruction (and its politics), one might ask, and, insofar as the 'imperatives' are a question for the subject, what price its 'death'.

²⁶ The classic figure, here, might in fact seem not to be the (postmodern) liberal, but the Metromarxist with the million-pound home, than whom no-one is more hostile to 'middle-class melancholia' as a discourse of privilege. Certainly he or she is a uniquely powerful reason for melancholy in him- or herself. But the true epitome of my argument on 26 March, 2006 is the more honourable figure of Norman Kember, British pacifist held hostage in Iraq who, when freed, finds himself thanking the SAS men who effected his release whilst insisting that they should not be in Iraq at all, becoming an object of right-wing satire in the process. The point is, not that the right must always have the best cards, but that the repeating game keeps on playing into their hands; on, and on, and on.

and fifteenth sections of Seminar VII. It would be mistaken to suppose that thought has somehow 'moved on' beyond these texts. Something like the reverse is the case: as with certain other great modern meditations, here thought arrived at an impasse within which we continue helplessly to circle. Both texts are chiefly concerned, not with the individual psyche, but with what Freud calls civilization. The relevant insistence is this: it may be that, if forgiveness is possible at all, is it so only in relation to a phantasm, a structure of misrecognition, a necessary turn away from the murderous, unforgivable imperative of *jouissance*. Freud raises the question everywhere in his critique of the idea of 'loving one's neighbour as oneself' (which he explicitly relates to the theme of forgiveness).²⁷ The passage is something of a *locus classicus* in modern thought:

The element of truth behind all this, *which people are so ready to disavow*, is that men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved...their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. *Homo homini lupus*. Who, in the face of all his experience of life and of history, will have the courage to dispute this assertion?²⁸

In the first instance, the question is whether the ethical subject could ever love the lupine creature to which Freud refers. How can I love him or her as myself? He or she wants to appropriate my goods. He or she wants to abuse me, to inflict suffering on me, to deprive me of my place in the sun. I perceive in him or her 'the frightening core of the *destrudo*' which Lacan tells us is confronted everywhere in analytical experience, and of which any denial is mere affectation and quibble.²⁹ I cannot forgive my neighbour for what I know about him, or her: 'my neighbour's *jouissance*, his harmful, malignant *jouissance*, is that which poses a problem for my love'.³⁰

But this is only the first and simplest aspect of the problem, and not of great importance to either Freud or Lacan. Certainly, as Lacan says, Freud has a horror of forgiveness. But this is not principally because of the feral antagonism that I and my neighbour must feel for one another. It is not chiefly because we know we are both aggressors that I cannot forgive my neighbour. Indeed, it is doubtful whether the aggressiveness in question is ever more than fleetingly manifest to me as being mine as much as his. There is another, more important barrier to forgiveness: I cannot love the other precisely because I identify in him the *destrudo* that I can *only* see in him and *not* in myself, that I have even transferred to him in order not to see it in myself. The real difficulty with forgiveness comes with the reflex of disavowal that Freud mentions. I cannot forgive my neighbour because he bears a burden that I cannot but place on him in order not to have to confront it in myself. In fact, my neighbour is as near to me as the heart 'within which is that of my *jouissance* which I daren't go near'.³¹ Hence Freud's horror: disavowal is the very mechanism by civilized society sustains itself. The psychic and/or social consequences of a refusal to project my *jouissance* on to my neighbour are potentially catastrophic.

There are still more turns to the screw. I cannot love my neighbour, not just because I recognize the wolf in him, but because he does not. Outrageously, he too thinks he has his reasons. As much as the threat of his *jouissance*, I cannot forgive my neighbour his mystifications of it, the specious glosses he confers upon it, the deceit and self-deceit he practises in relation to it. I cannot forgive the (theological, moral, economic, political) justifications he finds for what I know to be his malice towards me. I cannot forgive him, not only his untruthfulness, but his lack of self-awareness. Nor can I endure his refusal to recognize his mystifications for what they are. Furthermore, he even has the gall to assume that it is I, not him, who am untruthful in this way. I certainly cannot forgive him for such an assumption. For that matter, I must not be exposed to any risk of seeing in my neighbour the

²⁷ See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 21, tr. Joan Riviere, revised and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1979), p. 47. For the reference to forgiveness, see fn. 1.

²⁸ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 48, first italics mine.

²⁹ Lacan, *Seminar VII*, p. 194.

³⁰ Lacan, *Seminar VII*, p. 187.

³¹ Lacan, *Seminar VII*, p. 186.

mirror-image of my own disavowal. Indeed, I need my neighbour to be unforgivable. I need his fixity in evil, his unswerving dedication to it. That is why, if possible, his evil should amount to a positive faith or cause. The detestable and patently flawed ideology which my neighbour espouses makes his unforgivability all the clearer, because it shows him to be wrong as well as evil. Logically enough, my disavowal of my own *jouissance* intensifies the force with which my neighbour's *jouissance* manifests itself. If the superego, which is my aggression turned back upon itself, must also disavow my aggression, then, in making aggression so imperious as to require disavowal, it also makes it matter more, and thereby sharpens it. In fact, as Freud himself drily remarks, 'high ethical demands' put 'a positive premium on being bad':

One is irresistibly reminded of an incident in the French Chamber when capital punishment was being debated. A member had been passionately supporting its abolition and his speech was being received with tumultuous applause, when a voice from the hall called out: 'Que messieurs les assassins commencent!'³²

It is imperative that the assassins carry out their activities so that the Deputies can retain their assurance of being spotless.

So, too, our high-minded (democratic, humanitarian, rights-based) ethics requires certain formal figures of evil against which to define itself. It is through these figures that we know our own good, which is otherwise exposed to question. The efficient functioning of our institutions requires that we ceaselessly issue our anathemata. Whether in war or peace, it is essential that the process continue. The better we become, the more we need yet another avatar of the Grand Assassin or the Savage Predator who will enable us to continue proving that we are not him. On no account must he be properly forgivable. 'Under these conditions', writes Lacan, 'it is hardly surprising that everyone is sick'.³³

iii) Without the step backwards to a theological sanction, a postmodern ethics of forgiveness is unsustainable and a fantasy. There is no adequate secular foundation for such an ethics. Not surprisingly, some of the greatest writers have excoriated the very idea of forgiveness. It generates irony or becomes the object of *saeva indignatio*. Take Heine, for example:

My wishes are: a humble cottage with a thatched roof, but a good bed, good food, the freshest milk and butter, flowers before my window, and a few fine trees before my door; and if God wants to make my happiness complete, he will grant me the joy of seeing some six or seven of my enemies hanging from those trees. Before their death I shall, moved in my heart, forgive them all the wrong they did in my lifetime. One must, it is true, forgive one's enemies—but not before they have been hanged.³⁴

Or Beckett:

Let me say before I go any further that I forgive nobody. I wish them all an atrocious life and then the fires and ice of hell and in the execrable generations to come an honoured name.³⁵

Experts, these, in the winding stratagems involved in the mystification of *jouissance*: an infinity of radiant smiles — politicians, celebrities, models in commercials, girls on mobile telephones — inform us that we may claim our place in the sun. Meanwhile, here and there, noiselessly, obscurely, like one of Beckett's sandpiles, the desolation of the world creeps on.

In the eighties it was Coetzee, in the nineties, Sebald, too: in the present decade, no novelist is producing larger panoramas of desolation than Orhan Pamuk. To those who have travelled in central or

³² Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 48. The translators render this as 'It is the murderers who should make the first move'.

³³ Lacan, *Seminar VII*, p. 187.

³⁴ *Gedanken and Einfälle*, section one. Quoted in Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 47, fn. 1.

³⁵ *Trilogy* (London: John Calder, 1997), p. 180.

eastern Anatolia, his accounts of forsaken towns and cities (*The New Life, Snow*) will be bleakly familiar. This is a denuded world repeatedly forgotten by the imperial powers that busily traversed it, subjecting it to casual devastation as they did so. Today's empires remain oblivious both to it, and the vast Asiatic hinterland of which it is a token. No-one holidays in Kars.³⁶ Whether writing about Anatolia or his beloved Istanbul — which he tends to see as having become a forgotten city — Pamuk has a great deal to tell us about the difficulty Europe feels, has always felt in loving its neighbour, Turkey. No doubt he is not especially concerned to do this. He may be critical of European ignorance about, exploitation of, condescension and indifference to Turkey in particular and, more generally, the Near East and the Islamic world. But he also clearly feels an affection and admiration for modern European achievements, notably in art and thought. His work is partly driven by a spirit of emulation. Indeed, it is crucial that Pamuk not lapse into resentment or invective, that he remain deftly, wittily, fantastically at a distance from his material, that that is what constitutes his superiority to the greater powers. Rage would betoken defeat or enslavement. In one of its aspects, Pamuk's is even a work of redemption from obscurity. It is crucial, not only that Turkey and, beyond it, Islam, be noticed, represented, but also that they be represented apart from the staple images in which Europe has long represented them. Pamuk is partly concerned to make us hear voices from the landscapes of desolation that stretch from the Golden Horn to the Armenian border and beyond. He does this, however, on his terms and theirs, not ours.

But for the European reader, Pamuk also opens up a space of negativity. He turns repeatedly to the theme of being 'under Western eyes'. The Western gaze — the 'diminishing European gaze'³⁷ — is what indicts Turkey of 'shameful poverty'. Only night and shadow make Istanbul 'safe' from it (*I*, p. 32). The Western gaze is intensely problematic, not so much in its presence as in the fact that it is always a gaze from on high, that it invariably *presses downward*. What breaks the Turkish heart is not the material success of Europe as opposed to Turkish 'failure'. It is the European assumption that questions of material success are intrinsic to hierarchies of value; or rather, (to return to Freud and Lacan), since Europe both believes and does not believe this, the strange, Moebius-strip logic by which any interrogation of or challenge to those hierarchies of value always twists back into reassurance about or persistence in them. Take 'the unimaginably huge burdens of *hamals*' (*I*, p. 212), Istanbul porters who carry on their backs piles of tin metres high: Istanbulers are happy to see these porters photographed by themselves. They are deeply uneasy when they are photographed by European tourists. For the European presence invariably introduces the vector of shame. Pamuk's work struggles to reverse or at least to deflect that vector. From a European perspective, it should be read in terms of a cultural symptomatology; that is, it should be turned inside out, brought to utter what Pamuk himself must necessarily avoid saying, at least, in his own voice. For what is everywhere inscribed but nowhere explicit in Pamuk's work, save in certain characters, like Doctor Fine in *The New Life*, is the unforgivability of Europe (and America, too).

As reviewers have repeatedly said, Pamuk's fiction thrives on the fact that, like Turkey itself, it is poised on a geo-political cusp whose critical significance has both historical and cultural aspects. But, compelling though Pamuk's grasp of the issues undoubtedly is, they are no more important to his work than the theme of shame. It is precisely in his treatment of that theme that Pamuk piles up the evidence against the West. He gives no impression that he intends to do this or even that he knows he is doing it. It appears to happen almost by accident, as though the material itself supplies all that is necessary to the logic of indictment. Pamuk does not level accusations. He rather exploits what, with reference to postcolonial fiction, I once called the 'split-space of reception' to place the Westerner in a position of self-enquiry if not self-accusation.³⁸ He does this, above all, through his insistence on *hüzün*. For all its expanding portrait of the rich concreteness and even vitality of Turkish culture, Pamuk's fiction is caught up in *hüzün* as its single, most dominant mood. *Hüzün* is the Turkish word

³⁶ The eastern Anatolian town in which *Snow* is set. For a slightly earlier account which confirms Pamuk's picture of ruin, destitution and raw liveliness, see Philip Glazebrook, *Journey to Kars: A Modern Traveller in the Ottoman Lands* (London: Penguin, 1985), pp. 127-36.

³⁷ Orhan Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories of a City*, tr. Maureen Freely (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), hereafter cited in the text as *I*; p. 38.

³⁸ See *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel*, pp. 194-209. I am grateful to John Stotesbury for pointing me towards a new way of thinking about this theme in an interesting recent paper on Lelia Aboulela's *Minaret*. One issue that my paper raises, if incidentally and problematically, is the question of a newly emergent, European/American split-space of reception, but with reference, not to fiction, but to intellectual and scholarly discourse.

for melancholy. It has no place in European representations of the East. Yet, as Pamuk well knows, historically, Europe has long had its own versions of *hüzün*. They are, however, intensely foreign to contemporary Europe. In effect, like equality and justice in any important senses of those words, *hüzün* is presently one of the great, repressed European themes. One might think of it as constituting part of the buried life of the contemporary European psyche. At this point, the question of forgiveness becomes equivocal, for the problem for Europe becomes, not only its abandonment of Turkey, but finally also of its failure to care for itself. This failure is itself subject to the Moebius-strip logic insofar as Europe assumes the reverse, that it has finally come to know exactly what its own interests must be, and that its present success in pursuit of them is incontrovertible.

In *Istanbul: Memories of a City*, Pamuk devotes a whole chapter to *hüzün*:

...when it appears in the Koran....it means much the same as the contemporary Turkish word. The Prophet Mohammed referred to the year in which he lost both his wife Hatice and his uncle, Ebu Talip, as '*Senettul huzn*', or the year of melancholy; this confirms that the word is meant to convey a feeling of deep spiritual loss. (*I*, p. 81)

Here, precisely, the 'split-space of reception' is at issue. For Pamuk, *hüzün* has a paradoxical cast: it functions as an index however muted of 'spiritual agony and grief' (*I*, p. 81), and therefore of *profondeur*. However, from Avicenna to Sufi tradition and beyond, it is also a source of pride, of a life that continues in its very capacity for such emotions to proclaim that it is worth living. This acute sense of value is luminous simply in the melancholic beauty of the many photographs in *Istanbul*. However, pride is not a response that is available to Pamuk's Western reader (assuming that reader to be non-Islamic). As far as *hüzün* is concerned, Pamuk's Western reader is differently situated.

Hüzün has to do with loss, ruin. As such, as Pamuk repeatedly says, it can concern the community, the city, the nation as much as the individual person. Here the logic of *hüzün* is inseparable from a conviction of abandonment. In fact, Pamuk is the great exponent of the world of *hüzün* that begins immediately outside the walls of fortress Europe.³⁹ Its logic is the very logic of Western unforgivability. It is this aspect of *hüzün* with which Pamuk confronts his European reader. From a European vantage-point, his work provides a powerful and astringent check to any cheerful, 'progressive', contemporary ethics. In effect, it calls into radical question any contemporary ethics that shirks *hüzün*. What Pamuk starkly gives us to think is that no contemporary ethics that turns aside from the landscapes of *hüzün* can seem more than, at best, a bagatelle or epiphenomenon, at worst, a strategic distraction from what Walter Benjamin called 'catastrophe in permanence'.⁴⁰

The root of Turkish *hüzün* is radical displacement or dispossession. If Istanbul is a city of dilapidated or ruined homes, then the sense of homelessness has become a defining condition: 'Istanbul has been a city where, for the past hundred and fifty years, no one has been able to feel completely at home' (*I*, p. 103). This condition is inseparable from the steadily more evident if 'haphazard and gloomy' displays of 'Western influence' in Turkey (*I*, p. 10). The growth of European economic and cultural power and the destitution of the Turkish *oikos* go hand in hand. The point, however, is not European influence in itself: Ottoman Turkey was Western-influenced. The point, indeed, is that Europe has precisely *not* filled the gap left by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. It has not erased

³⁹ This is not to suggest that there is or can be a logical Eastern frontier to Europe. Is the Caucasus more logical than the Bosphorus? What exactly would a Europe be that included a part of Asia Minor? A Europe definitively concerned to imagine itself together with its other, rather than assimilating him? Might it also be a Europe that cannot relinquish the aspiration to be more than just itself, therefore by definition an uncompletable project, therefore doomed never to be a forgivable one? Or turn in the other direction: there is an argument for saying that *hüzün* begins a lot further west than the Bosphorus, say, in the Balkans. But 'fortress Europe' is of course a conceptual, even an ideological entity as much as a geographical or empirical one. Conversely, *hüzün* is not merely a 'subjective' mood, but inheres in landscapes, material cultures. *Hüzün* is a quality of objects (dirty coca-cola bottles in Trabzon; the rusting wrecks of merchant ships on the shores of the Black Sea; the traces of crumbling Istanbul masonry on your fingers. Contrast the stunning beauty of Istanbul as painted repeatedly in the early nineteenth century by Antoine-Ignace Melling). For a suggestive commentary on the political topography of melancholy, see Wolf Lepenies, *Melancholy and Society*, tr. Jeremy Gaines and Doris Jones (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁴⁰ For what Benjamin means by this, see 'Central Park', *Selected Writings* Vol. 4, 1938-40 (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 161-99, passim.

Ottoman culture; it has rather let it remain as an inchoate set of fragmented traces drifting ever further from their historical meaning, and therefore a source of torment. Certainly, like rosebay willow herb rampant amidst ruins, European culture is unrelentingly invasive. But even as it tightens its grip on Turkey, an insouciant Europe also does not really want to embrace it. It rather leaves weak, pallid, second-order replicas of its own culture in its wake. In itself, as Pamuk repeatedly says, Europe remains distant from and unavailable to Turks (including those domiciled in Europe itself). *Hüzün* is the ineluctable consequence of this predicament. There is, however, an irony, here, that is at once both piquant and macabre: left to themselves (that is, uninstructed by the Turkish writer), however subliminally, Europeans may intuit the melancholy that is to some extent of Western making, but only to convert it into the 'mystery' of Istanbul, finding the ruinous state of the city charming if not romantic. Thus Gautier wrote about the frequent fires amidst the old wooden houses of Istanbul with something like excitement and delight.

Europe squats in domestic space like an alien presence: 'Sitting rooms', writes Pamuk, of middle-class Istanbul houses before the 1970s, 'were not meant to be places where you could hope to sit comfortably; they were little museums designed to demonstrate to a hypothetical visitor that the householders were Westernized' (*I*, p. 10). If Pamuk's father's constant travelling and the unhappiness of his parents' marriage, or the authority of German as opposed to Turkish nannies, are anything to go by, the psychic power of Europe has invaded the home in more senses than one. The displacement and adulteration of Turkishness, of the extraordinary density of a historical culture on which the West is stamping a sell-by date: these are manifested in Pamuk's work in far more various and complex ways than I can cover here. Take Doctor Fine's evocation, for instance of the loss of historical time in objects. Objects have traditionally held memories. They have served as repositories of time, a time fixed in matter itself. Then came Coca-Cola, Ronson lighters, Lux hand soap, UHU glue, AEG refrigerators, Crescent Gas:

But as soon as he put these articles in his store which was so serene that it seemed to exist in a former time, he realized that not only could he no longer tell the time, he didn't know what time was. Not only he but also his merchandise had been distressed — much like nightingales who are disturbed by the presumptuous finches in the next cage — by the presence of these lacklustre, prosaic objects....⁴¹

With the invasion of Turkey by modern European business, a relationship between culture, history and the material world comes under threat and begins to disintegrate. What enters in its stead is *hüzün*; *hüzün*, that is, as it cannot but be: the mirror-image of Capital *triumphans*.

But perhaps the most striking evocation of the self-alienation effected by the European intrusion is Jelal's account of Master Bedii in *The Black Book*. Master Bedii is a traditional Turkish mannequin-maker, an artist in his craft. His work is prohibited, but he continues it unperturbed. Then, in excitement, with the early years of the Westernizing republic, he sees the new interest in mannequins in clothes-shops. This, he assumes, must be his opportunity. Not at all: his mannequins look too much like Turks:

A hardboiled window-dresser, after being dazzled by Mater Bedii's masterpieces, explained that in the interest of his own livelihood, he unfortunately could not place these "authentic Turks, these real citizens" in his windows: Turks nowadays didn't want to be Turks anymore but something else. That's how come they'd instituted a code of proper attire, shaved their beards, reformed their tongues and their alphabet. A more laconic store owner pointed out that his customers did not buy an outfit but, in truth, bought a dream. What they really wanted to purchase was the "dream" of being like the others who wore the same outfit.⁴²

Bedii returns to his masterpieces of art. What these masterpieces at length convey, however, is a shock so acute as to constitute 'a kind of terror – gruesome, grievous and dark!'⁴³ For they demonstrate in their most ordinary gestures, 'be they nose wiping or belly laughing, walking or casting unfriendly

⁴¹ Pamuk, *The New Life*, tr. Güneli Gün (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. 127.

⁴² Pamuk, *The Black Book*, tr. Güneli Gün (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 54.

⁴³ *The Black Book*, p. 55.

looks, shaking hand or uncorking a bottle', how unlike themselves Turks now are. The modern Turkish body leads a substitute life that 'came in canisters from the West and played by the hour in cinemas'.⁴⁴ The West has usurped somatic life. It has found its way into the most intimate and casual zones of physical experience and expression. The 'terror' and 'grief' produced by this recognition translate into the appropriately muted form of *hüzün*. *Hüzün* is inseparable from the loss involved in the production of modern Turkish *ersatz*, here understood at the level of the myriad vagaries of mundane corporeal life.

'Although everyone knew it as freedom from the laws of Islam', writes Pamuk, 'no one was quite sure what else Westernization was good for' (*I*, p. 10). As Blue spells out in *Snow*, if, here and there, the West produces democracy, this is only according to its own conception of democracy: 'Can the West endure any democracy achieved by enemies who in no way resemble them?'.⁴⁵ Westernization certainly does not lead of itself to liberalization or encourage cosmopolitanism. 'No one who's even slightly Westernized can breathe freely in this country', remarks Sunay in *Snow*, 'unless they have a secular army protecting them'.⁴⁶ 'After seeing all the wealth of the Middle East seep out of their cities', Pamuk asserts, 'Istanbul became an inward-looking, nationalist people; we are therefore suspicious of anything new, and especially anything that smacks of foreignness. (Even if we covet it)' (*I*, p. 186). The irony is that, however modern or indeed postmodern its supposed principles, insofar as it cannot but manifest itself as a process of exploitation and deprivation, Westernization may consolidate if it does not actually breed, not only authoritarian and repressive government, but the myopia, parochialism and violence of nationalism and fundamentalism themselves. The failure of generosity in the forms of Westernization available to Turkey does not open minds. It hardens them. In Turkey, Europe becomes a simulacrum of itself. Here, too, however, in the closeness of that simulacrum to parody, Europe may fleetingly glimpse its own Janus face, the poverty of its plenitude. Europeans may insist that it is Turkey that designates the limits of their responsibility. In fact, it is here that their gestures of abandonment seem most decisive.

iv) Pamuk offers us a picture of Turkey through which we apprehend the desolation of European purposes and ends, but in a mirror-image or as a set of traces, by reading against the grain. Yet precisely because it is a mirror-image it is also, in one sense, a faithful image. For the Western reader, desolation appears according to the Freudian and Lacanian double-bind, in the vestigial forms in which alone it is thinkable. Pamuk himself is shrewd enough (or Westernized enough) to know this. He is well aware of his own complicities. Indeed, to some extent, for Pamuk as for Heine and Beckett, the struggle with the double-bind constructs itself as an ironical, Swiftian snare.

But what if there were an element that even Swift, Heine, Freud, Lacan and Beckett had not been able to factor into the equation, a thought not given them to think because, though still evident in a certain strain of Islamic philosophy, it had long been lost to the Western mind? In a complex, involved body of philosophical and scholarly work that now spans nearly twenty-five years, Christian Jambet has been meditating on the significance that the philosophy of esoteric Islam might have for the West.⁴⁷ Importantly, though Jambet's work is everywhere concerned with theology, he insists that it is not theological in itself. His field is rather the philosophy of religion: here the question becomes, not what it is possible to know about God, but what it is possible to know about one history of thought by examining another. At one point in *La logique des Orientaux*, in particular, Jambet argues that the

⁴⁴ *The Black Book*, p. 56.

⁴⁵ *Snow*, p. 233.

⁴⁶ *Snow*, p. 207.

⁴⁷ The distinction between exoteric and esoteric Islam is everywhere crucial in Jambet. Exoteric Islam is the outward law or formal clothing of religion, as supremely in Shari'a law, the canonical law as first put forth in the Koran and Sunnah, elaborated by the analytical principles of the schools and adhered to by both Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims. It is concerned with matters of orthodoxy in social and political life, and suited to the generality of believers, intelligible to the public. Esoteric Islam, about which Jambet chiefly writes, is a question of theological teachings derived from the Koran and Islamic revelation. In Sufism, for instance, it is concerned with an inward path of mystical union, with the dividing line between world and God. Esoterism is the religious centre where exoterism is its circumference. It consists of doctrines communicated to and intelligible by initiates. It betokens a spiritual journey where exoterism betokens dogma.

Heideggerian concept of the 'forgetting of Being' has misled us. It is not Being that, beginning with Plato, Western thought forgets. It is rather the 'cassure intérieure', the radical, interior break between two ontologically distinct realms inaugurated by Plato himself. 'Forgetting' begins with Aristotle, who thinks Being as homogeneous, lacking in qualitative difference. From Aristotle onwards, the thought of the break is steadily erased.

This thought, with its 'duality of poles' — no question for Jambet of dismantling 'binary oppositions'; the issue is rather whether we have not long ceased to think the truly significant duality — insists on a structure of ethical differentiation that is situated at the very heart of Being.⁴⁸ Islam has long continued to incorporate the remnants of this Platonic scheme, as Western philosophy has not. But this is, to say the least, no simple matter. On the one hand, Avicenna made Aristoteleanism integral to exoteric Islamic tradition and Shari'a law. On the other hand, a tradition deriving from Plato, Plotinus and Hellenic neo-Platonism continues if fitfully to insist in esoteric Islam from Suhrawardi through the Ismaelian theologians of Alamut and Sufism to Mulla Sadra and beyond. This tradition, lost to the West, is concerned with gnosis, illumination, the casting of light into obscurity. The coincidence in our culture of Islamophobia and anti-Platonism may not be altogether fortuitous. Indeed, by yet another twist of the Freudian and Lacanian screw, it may be in the very territory that supposedly harbours our enemies that the image of our particular, intimate loss — as opposed to Pamuk's — most poignantly appears. For Jambet shows us that esoteric Islam offers a sumptuously elaborated thought of radical unworldliness.

If the Platonic 'cassure' presents a 'duality of poles', it also presents us with the 'enigmatic topology' of 'the symbolic narrative of the Cave'.⁴⁹ Jambet asks us to think the gnostic traditions of esoteric Islam in what might seem to be paradoxical terms, as involving a polar structure that is also extremely complex and subtle. The complexity and subtlety emerge above all in the nuancing of the division between the two ontological realms, a kind of maximal resistance to dualism within dualism itself. Much of Jambet's work is effectively devoted to the meticulous description of this extraordinarily fine system of nuance. I shall briefly discuss a single aspect of it, the concept of the 'imaginal world'.

From Suhrawardi to Mulla Sadra, the imaginal is a median world between spirit and matter. Jambet describes it as composed of 'spiritual matter', 'phenomenal substances' not subject to the dense time and space of our material world, existing in a temporality and spatiality subtler than those of which we are most conscious, or to which we are most accustomed.⁵⁰ Sadra in particular asserts 'the full ontic autonomy of psychic reality'.⁵¹ Jambet's most extended discussion of the theme of the imaginal world comes in 2.3 of his book on Sadra, *L'Acte d'être*.⁵² The chapter is entitled 'The Imagination'. On the one hand, in Sadra's conception of it, the imagination never leaves the world and always borrows from experience. On the other hand, it grasps essences in particular, epiphanic forms which, as events, are not exactly of the world, in the sense that, like all unpredictable occurrences, they are not what the world foresaw. Sadra tends specifically to privilege the visionary imagination, as in dreams and premonitions, which he understands as belonging to the imaginal world. In doing so, he decisively separates immateriality from universality. He is a great thinker of 'immaterial particularity'.⁵³ Memory is not one of the imagination's superior functions. But it provides a simple example of the particularity in question. The imagination as memory prevents sense-impressions from dispersing, guards them as a treasure trove. It is as immaterial particularities alone that they survive.

For Sadra, the imagination is habitually at the service of the thinking mind, that is, it rejects images not coinciding with exteriority. It begins its own proper work only when or insofar as the

⁴⁸ Jambet, *La logique des Orientaux: Henry Corbin et la science des formes* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), p. 151.

⁴⁹ Jambet, *La logique des Orientaux*, *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Jambet, *La grande resurrection*, p. 210.

⁵¹ See James Winston Morris, 'Introduction', *The Wisdom of the Throne: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mulla Sadra* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 3-85, p. 37.

⁵² See Jambet, *L'Acte d'être: La philosophie de la revelation chez Mullâ Sadrâ* (Paris: Fayard, 2002), pp. 277-342, esp. pp. 310-21.

⁵³ *L'Acte d'être*, p. 300.

thinking mind is at rest. The suspension of thought is the liberation of the imagination, as in particular in delirium, sleep, fear, childhood fantasy, madness, sickness, dotage. Here the liberated soul takes its vacation from the world. It finds its way amidst imaginative forms that Suhrawardi called 'suspended citadels', citadels 'without substrate'.⁵⁴ These forms have a distinct ontological status, that of the semblance: like mirror-images, they exist *in concreto* but not in reality. They have the pure strangeness of the mirror-image, which is that of an existence resembling our own, but which we must forever lack. Suhrawardi and Sadra's Platonic inheritance makes it possible for them to have knowledge of this world. Avicenna's Aristoteleanism debars him from it. What is most crucial here, however, is that, whilst the imaginal world may represent a stage on the way to release from desire or *jouissance*, it does not constitute a release in itself. In one sense, the reverse: the imaginal world is a world of fulfilled desire, 'jouissance pleine',⁵⁵ but under one sole condition: that the object whereby fulfilment is procured is not real. By a weird but beautiful kink of logic, like the mundane world, the 'imaginal world' is imperfect, but also an index of a state of virtue.⁵⁶

One might be tempted to ask, here, whether art, perhaps modern art in particular, is a paradigmatic instance of the imaginal world. But is it really worth attempting a fleeting, casual conflation of the two? Do we need yet another grand model for theoretical commentary on modernism? Better to talk about specifics. Jambet has little to say about art, even Islamic art. But in the section of *L'Acte d'être* that I have been discussing, there are two references to modern art. The first is to Borges, great master of the mirror-image that faithfully reflects the world, but never as the world itself. Borges is master, too, of the infinite recession, the endless multiplication of images that both belong and do not belong to sensible reality. Borges's kind of infinity inspires no horror in Suhrawardi. It rather delights him, as a display of the riches of the imaginal world. But 2.3 actually ends with the following quotation, by way of a different form of example:

Suddenly I fell asleep, plunged into that deep slumber in which vistas are opened to us, of a return to childhood, the recapture of past years, and forgotten feelings, of disincarnation, the transmigration of souls, the evoking of the dead, the illusions of madness, retrogression towards the most elementary of the natural kingdoms (for we say that we often see animals in dreams, but we forget that almost always we are animals ourselves therein, deprived of that reasoning power which projects upon things the light of certainty; on the contrary, we bring to bear on the spectacle of life only a dubious vision, extinguished anew every moment by oblivion, the former reality fading before that which follows it as one projection of a magic lantern fades before the next as we change the slide), all those mysteries which we know and into which we are in reality initiated every night, as into the other great mystery of extinction and resurrection.⁵⁷

This great Proustian exfoliation of the mind is at once sufficiently luminous and complex as, not only to fill out what in Jambet remains a rather abstract concept, but also to convey what he might mean by the beauty of the imaginal domain and unity with the unreal object of desire. Indeed, in a different manifestation, it is that beauty and unity which Marcel will eventually choose, in choosing the forms of the satisfaction of desire provided by art, rather than those he has hoped for from life.

I have tried to resist what Beckett beautifully called 'the morbid dread of sphinxes',⁵⁸ the Sphinx being a figure dear to both Freud and Lacan. I have tried to meditate on the problem of unforgivability without at any moment suggesting that 'I know what to do about it'. My essay provides no sop to (left- or postmodern-) liberal consciences (including my own). It offers no recommendations or academic

⁵⁴ *L'Acte d'être*, p. 310. Jambet is quoting from Shihaboddin Yahya Suhrawardi, *Kitab Hitmat al-ishraq*, Book IV, Chapter 8.

⁵⁵ *L'Acte d'être*, p. 314.

⁵⁶ See *L'Acte d'être*, p. 371.

⁵⁷ Marcel Proust, *Within a Budding Grove*, tr. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, revised by D.J. Enright (:London: Vintage, 1996), pp. 461-62.

⁵⁸ *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. with a foreword Ruby Cohn (London: John Calder, 1983), p. 92.

summons to action ('Affirm the imaginal'; 'Convert to Islam'). It certainly has no theological dimension, and holds out no theological consolation. It serves up no palliatives. No apothegms or nostrums are extractable from it. All the same: this world of the suspension of the citadel that I have briefly indicated; this world so closely associated with the condition of virtue, available in particular to certain 'marginal' or disregarded conditions or states of mind; this world of a desire that (in one sense) stops short, satisfied by immaterial particularities, of (perhaps) the modern commitment to art; this world seems to me conceivably to be a forgivable one. It is worth noting, too, that, for Sadra, thinking the imaginal world also involves a theory of happiness.