

# ‘Rideaux rouges’: The Scene of Ideology and the Closure of Representation (Matter and Theatre in Althusser and Derrida)

Thomas Clément MERCIER

(ANID FONDECYT, University Adolfo Ibáñez)

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## ABSTRACT

As they make their way through Louis Althusser’s and Jacques Derrida’s texts, readers will cross innumerable curtains – ‘the words and things’, as Derrida says, as many fabrics of traces. These curtains open onto a multiplicity of scenes and *mises en scène*, performances, roles, rituals, actors, plays – thus unfolding the space of a certain theatricality. This essay traces Althusser’s and Derrida’s respective deployments of the theatrical motif. In his theoretical writings, Althusser’s theatrical dispositive aims to designate the practical and material dimension of the scenes of ideology, materially enacted through roleplays, performances, acts, or discourses. At the horizon: a scientific discourse on ideology or, later, a strategic intervention in the class struggle. This scientific and/or strategic orientation echoes Althusser’s definition of materialism: ‘no more storytelling’. But Derrida’s ‘closure of representation’ reminds us that there’s no presence – even the most ‘material’ – no ‘truth’ or ‘correctness’ – in theoretical or strategic terms – without effects of re-presentation, differential repetition, narrative reconstruction: theatricality and materiality suppose a force of resistance, a secret heterogeneity, curtain foldings. Hence the irreducible necessity of reading, storytelling, transformative interpretation. What are the implications for thinking inheritance and debt – for example, the one binding Althusser and Derrida, and us to them?

## KEYWORDS

Deconstruction; materialism; Marxism; representation; ideology; performance; storytelling

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Thomas Clément MERCIER  
(ANID FONDECYT, University Adolfo Ibáñez)

we can see well enough that there can never be a given on the fore-stage of obviousnesses, except by means of a giving ideology which stays behind, with which we keep no accounts and which gives us what it wants. If we do not go and look behind the curtain we shall not see its act of ‘giving’: it disappears into the given as all workmanship does into its works. We are its spectators, i.e., its mendicants. (Althusser 2015, 315–6)

The *mise en scène* is precipitated [*se précipite*], the actor-dramatist-producer will have done everything himself, he also knocks the three or four times, the curtain is about to rise. But we do not know if it rises on the scene or in the scene. Before the entrance of any character, there is a curtained bed [*un lit à rideaux*]. All comings and goings, for the essential [*pour l’essentiel*], will have to pass the curtain [*passer le rideau*].

I myself will not open this curtain – I leave this to you – onto all the others, the words and things (curtains, canvases, veils, screens, hymens, umbrellas, etc.) with which I have concerned myself for so long. One could attempt to relate all these fabrics to one another, according to the same law. I have neither the time nor the taste for this; it can be done by itself, without anyone’s intervention, or done without [*la chose peut se faire d’elle-même ou l’on peut s’en passer*]. (Derrida 1980, 329–30, my translation)

It all starts with a declaration of debt.<sup>1</sup> I owe it to you and to myself to speak about what is owed; about the debt binding Jacques Derrida to Louis Althusser, Louis Althusser to Jacques Derrida, about the debt binding us to them and to one another, here, today, on the virtual platform of a conference, or that of a journal issue. This might seem like a ‘virtual encounter’, as one says, but something of the debt perhaps remains nonvirtualisable. Something of the debt seems to exceed the stage on which it is recognised, represented. Virtuality and actuality of an encounter which binds us to the other beyond the encounter ‘as such’.

I’ve been called, invited, interpellated, and I turned back. I can’t even remember saying ‘yes’, but it was too late anyway, because, yes, you already

know that IOU: I owe it to you and to myself to speak, and to speak about a debt, a recognition of debt, and perhaps about a debt exceeding all recognition and representation.

That I must *recognise* the debt, that it must be *represented*, to myself and to the other, seems to be the condition for its acknowledgement. But, just like any heritage or gift, just like anything that remains to be read, interpreted, perhaps transformed – for instance, through ‘an interpretation that transforms the very thing it interprets’ (Derrida 1994, 163) – the debt seems to both require a certain representativity, a certain theatricality of ideology, and to exceed visibility, manifestation, and representation. The debt both demands and resists representation. This is what I will speak about in this essay.

## ‘rideaux rouges’

The phrase ‘rideaux rouges’ is a quotation, taken from Althusser’s autobiographical text *L’avenir dure longtemps*, first published posthumously in 1992 (Althusser 2007, 34). It is a quotation and as such is surrounded by quotation marks. In saying this, I am using or citing the traditional distinction between ‘use’ and ‘mention’. Jacques Derrida once compared quotation marks with ‘clothespins’:

Quotation marks generally function as small clothespins meant to keep at a distance, without really touching them, clothes which, whether dirty or still wet, won’t be freed from their clothespins and really touched until they are properly *clean* and dry [propre]. (Derrida 1990, 77)

But here I am tempted to compare quotation marks with curtains: *des rideaux*, whose function consists in framing or enclosing a theatre stage – a separate *scène* or stage on which what is taking place should perhaps not be taken quite *literally*, as one dares to say, but as the enactment of a scenography, a performance, one which allows us to mention what’s effectively happening on the stage, to account for it, without however precipitating it into the realm of pure effectiveness, reality, or truth. Quotation marks, like curtains, ‘keep at a distance’, as Derrida says, out of touch. They somewhat protect from contact and contamination. They materialise a separate scene within the text, another reality, and maintain a border or division between what’s enclosed within quotation marks and ‘outside’ reality. And it just so happens that the curtains of quotation marks, here in my title, themselves enclose curtains – very old, worn-out, *red* curtains: ‘de très vieux rideaux rouge Empire’ (Althusser 2007, 33). These curtains first appear on the first page of *L’avenir dure longtemps*, almost at the very beginning, when the curtain rises. Their mention seems to be coextensive with the autobiographical narrative itself – but these ‘very old

red curtains' in fact pre-exist the scene Althusser will now describe. From the moment the autobiography begins, some invisible curtain separates between two darknesses, two nights, 'entre deux nuits':

What follows, down to the last detail, is my precise memory of those events, forever engraved in me through all my suffering – between two nights, the unknown one from which I was emerging and the one I was about to enter, I shall say when and how: here is the scene of the murder just as I experienced it.

Suddenly I am up and in my dressing-gown at the foot of the bed in my flat at the *École normale*. The grey light of a November morning – it's almost nine o'clock on Sunday the sixteenth – filters on to the end of the bed through the tall window to the left, framed by very old Empire red curtains which had hung there a long time, lacerated by time and burnt by the sun.

Helene, also in a dressing-gown, is lying on her back before me. (Althusser 1993, 15, translation modified; 2007, 33)

Just like quotation marks, one needs at least two curtains to frame a stage. And, in Althusser's text, the 'same' red curtains – themselves lacerated, cut, almost torn, dismembered, divided, tattered, in ribbons – the 'same' red curtains reappear, a few paragraphs later, closing the chapter that depicts 'the scene of the murder'. They frame the scene, as if surrounding a stage:

The long, lacerated red curtains hang in tatters on each side of the window – the one on the right brushing against the bottom of the bed. I recall seeing our friend Jacques Martin in his tiny bedroom in the Sixteenth District. He was found dead one day in August [1963] and had been stretched out on his bed for several days. On his chest lay the long stem of a scarlet rose: a silent message from beyond the grave to the two of us who had been his friends for twenty years, a reminder of Beloyannis. At that moment I pull a narrow, torn ribbon from the long red curtain and, without breaking it, gently place it diagonally across Helene's chest, from her right shoulder to her left breast. (1993, 16, translation modified; 2007, 34–35)

Elsewhere, much later in Althusser's autobiographical text, in a drastically different context, another place and time, the 'same' iterable curtains reappear, lacerated again, in 'pieces', here turned into 'rags' ('haillons'), torn between different autobiographical spacetimes, different connotations, values, different metaphorical virtualities. It is now in 'les Bois de Boulogne', near Algiers, what is called today 'la Forêt d'El Mouradia' – a 'paradise' where Althusser used to walk as a child with his grandfather (1993, 61–64). The grandfather is an 'impossible' character, says the narrator-Althusser, just like Hélène. And the narrator proceeds to describe the forest-paradise:

I also used to go out with my grandfather into the woods. What a sense of freedom I had! With him, there were never any dangers and nothing was forbidden. How happy I was! Though he was such a ‘grumbler’, considered by everyone to be so impossible (like Helene later on), he talked to me quietly like an equal. He pointed out the different trees and plants and told me all about them. I was especially fascinated by the endless eucalyptuses; I liked feeling the scaliness of their bark, long tubes of which would suddenly come crashing down from the tops of their trunks and hang aimlessly [*sans fin*] like limp arms or pieces of rag [*haillons*] (the rags I would later enjoy dressing with [*les haillons, plus tard, dont j’aimais à me vêtir*], the rags [*haillons*] of the long, red, tattered curtains hanging in my bedroom at the École normale) – their leaves, so smooth and so long, curved and pointed, which changed with the seasons from dark green to blood red, and their flower-fruit, with its delicate pollen and the bewitching scent of a ‘pharmaceutical remedy’. There were also the wild pink cyclamens: finding them hidden among their dark leaves was to discover them anew each time, as one had to pull up their garment to reveal their pink, intimate flesh; the wild asparagus, as stiff as erect sexes, that I could munch raw straight from the ground when they came out. Then there were terrible aloes, covered with prickly thorns, occasionally (once every ten years?) thrusting up into the air a huge spike [*dard*] slowly crowned with a flower that no one could reach! (1993, 63–64, translation modified; 2007, 83)

Here one could insert a long meditation on what Derrida says about flowers, rhetoric, and symbolism in ‘La mythologie blanche’ and *Glas*, more particularly concerning everything that exceeds, in flowers like in anything else, a strictly symbolic reading. Because, believe me, it is certainly not my intention to provide a symbolic analysis of Althusser’s autobiographical text, of those curtains, of the colour red, for instance – be it in political, sexual, or psychoanalytic terms – and of everything that might be symbolised by their conjunction, here, to the old (‘vieux’), the worn-out, or to the Empire, in a bedroom located inside the École normale supérieure. While Althusser’s text – just like any text – can always be read symbolically, it also defies strictly symbolic readings. In the passages quoted above, the political and psychosexual symbolics of the red curtains are structurally unstable, reversible, undecidable: not only do their depictions shift from the political Right to the Left, from the connotations of the Imperial Red (‘rouge Empire’) to its conversion into the communist symbolics of Jacques Martin’s ‘red rose’ – which, according to Althusser in ‘Les Faits’ (1993, 361), also echoes Maurice Thorez’s description of communism as providing ‘bread and roses’ to the people – as it moves ‘from [Hélène’s] right shoulder to her left breast’; but, later in Althusser’s text (that is, earlier in Louis’s lifetime), in the description of the Algerian forest as a lost ‘paradise’, the red curtains are associated with a profusion of symbols and metaphors multiplying the narrator’s identities and desires, generating sexual motifs zigzagging between the feminine and the

masculine, blood red and fleshy pink straddling and challenging boundaries between life and death, day and night, love and violence, nature and culture.<sup>2</sup> Limits are troubled: opposites can turn into each other.

In the same passage, Althusser-the-narrator confesses his taste for wearing ‘rags’ (‘haillons’); but this affect, this taste for dressing up, for disguise, said with parodic affectation (‘les haillons dont j’aimais à me vêtir’), also modifies, through textual juxtaposition, the red curtains’ function and materiality: ‘les haillons, plus tard, dont j’aimais à me vêtir, les haillons des grands rideaux rouges de ma chambre à coucher à l’École normale’ (2007, 83). So, not only do the red curtains denote a certain theatricality in and of the text, they’re also textually and materially associated, through the verbal matter of ‘haillons’, with the narrator’s taste for costuming – as if the red curtains themselves, those pieces of detachable fabric, of clothing, of broken textile and text, had already been repurposed, transformed, deconstructed, materially-and-textually recycled and converted into costume attire – be it *haillons* – manifesting a taste for disguise or *travestissement* time-traveling through the narrator’s life (a theatrical life of written memories and words), as if magnified and multiplied by the autobiographical gesture. The narrator-character himself played a character, narrated himself – or so the text seems to suggest, between the lines and through the curtains.

For do we know what curtains *are*? Curtains usually divide, mark a border (sometimes even an ‘iron curtain’) between territories, spaces, discreet topologies – for example between the theatre stage and what is called ‘reality’. They separate, dissimulate; they suppose a compartmentalization, a keeping apart, a *secretum*, a secret. But curtains are not *sensu stricto* walls, or even doors. Even when they’re shut, and given the right circumstances, curtains can let themselves be crossed, passed; the possibility of this passage speaks to a certain *débordement*, an overflowing of the limit. Curtains – ‘the words and things’, as Derrida puts it in our epigraph – testify to the text’s capacity to both mark *and* cross oppositional borders, to separate *and* travel, quasi-magically, between different spacetimes, to indicate a limit and its possible effacement – starting with the limit between the text’s ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, between ‘writing’ and ‘life’. The text is not simply a theatre stage, if ‘stage’ implies the fixity of a border between theatrical performance and what one calls ‘reality’. There’s no hidden truth behind the text’s curtains; or, if there’s any, it remains undecidable as self-presence, unrepresentable, which means that it remains to be decided, read, written, translated, precariously stabilised through an interpretative gesture that can only participate in the text it reads, reproduce *and* transform the very thing it interprets – thereby partaking in the text and its ‘secret’, provoking more stories, more text and more curtains – perhaps the same, only different – resulting maybe in a constant ‘passer le rideau’, as Derrida also puts it in our epigraph.<sup>3</sup> One can always read, and pass the curtain. One always reads through curtains, crossing a limit which however remains unfindable as such, undecidable. This difficulty to locate curtains can

be traced in Althusser's letters to Franca, where the curtain metaphor frequently appears to mark inside-outside limits, as well as their displacements – sometimes referring to Althusser's inner psyche, to what he calls his interior 'nights': a separation within the self, a self-partition, here for instance in a 1962 letter:

tu vois quel privilège tu as de me connaître: je ne t'épargne pas le partage de mes ombres et de mes brumes... j'existe par-derrière, quelque part: puisses-tu me reconnaître derrière ce rideau brutal et soudain, – comme ces nappes de brumes qui en un instant nous enveloppèrent quand nous marchions sur la plage, le 1er janvier, toi Mino et moi. Je suis derrière, ombre moi-même, mais je suis là; muet, mais je suis là; indiscernable mais je suis là . . . (Althusser 1998, 151)

Let me say in passing, to foreshadow the second part of this essay, that the metaphors used by Althusser to describe this internal self-separation – 'shadows', 'mists' – are also the ones used by Marx to describe the alienating or veiling effects of ideology in *The German Ideology* and in *Capital* – a description whose 'metaphorical' nature Althusser wished to overcome, notably in the 1970 essay on Ideological State Apparatuses (1971).

In other letters from Althusser to Franca, the curtain motif functions by separating the loving couple from the rest of the world, from daylight and from the sun. Here's one example, where the curtains mobilise the aesthetics and erotics of sleep in the bedroom, *la chambre*, instantiating a sort of *camera obscura*:

ma pauvre amour et moi qui allais te dire je n'ai qu'une envie qu'une et une seule à l'heure qu'il est aujourd'hui par ce soleil, ce serait de fermer les fenêtres tirer les rideaux et m'allonger dans le grand lit avec toi...!  
(Althusser 1998, 226)

I don't know if these curtains, mentioned in 1962, are the same as the 'rideaux rouges' opening Althusser's autobiography. But, same or different, let's now return to *L'avenir dure longtemps* before curtains start to dangerously multiply. Althusser begins his autobiography with a 'disclaimer' stressing the *juridical* dimension of this text: the autobiographical narrative is explicitly presented as a *substitute* for a 'plea', for a 'court appearance' that never took place (1993, 13). The autobiography is a quasi-testimony: it comes *in lieu* of a *témoignage* that was never allowed *to take place* as such. This testimonial dimension – supposedly implying honesty, sincerity, transparency – is confirmed, on the following page, by the first sentence of the first chapter, announcing the description of 'the scene' with these words, already quoted: 'What follows, down to the last detail, is my precise memory of those events, for ever engraved on my mind through all my suffering. . . . Here is the scene of the murder just as I experienced it.' (1993, 15) This incipit is also a promise – one

that will be somewhat broken, for at least two reasons related to a certain perjury or quasi-perjury inscribed in the text.

First, the chapter won't describe 'the scene of the murder', not really: it is a scene of which in fact nothing is said, since the narrator seems to suggest that he was not 'present' during the scene, that he didn't *experience* or *live* it as such, in a presence. This seems to both validate *and* contradict his announcement: 'voici la scène du meurtre telle que je l'ai vécue' (2007, 33). The murder 'itself' is described without being described; the 'act' is not described, not as *present* act, but is given to be read *in absentia*, with only traces remaining, including a corpse and the red curtains – as if the curtains surrounded an empty stage, a void or a night, as if the curtains could only divide 'between two nights'. Only traces left to testify, to be deciphered. Second, by staging 'the scene of the murder' – 'la scène du meurtre' – as a 'scène', on a quasi-stage, and by mentioning the very curtains surrounding that scene, something in Althusser's text seems to already betray, willy-nilly, the scene's theatricality, its scenography or stagedness, its *mise en scène*, pointing to a certain fabricatedness, narrativity, or fictionality of the text, even in the seemingly most honest and transparent of autobiographical gestures or testimonies. It's as if the text, by showcasing 'red curtains' from the very opening, inscribed within itself, to exhibit them, its theatricality and fictionality, thus breaching from within the autobiographical contract, predicated on sincerity and truth-telling. Said inscription – and inscription in general – already opens the possibility of perjury. This inscribed connection between autobiography and theatricality, writing and fictionality, in relation to perjury, to a certain impossibility of forgiveness, and to the secret, will return in my conclusion.

### 'notre petit théâtre théorique'

Let's broaden the scene a little. There is something between Althusser and theatre: a taste, a drive for the stage, and an acute sense of dramaturgy. You didn't hear it from me, of course. Althusser's taste for the theatre was noticed and analysed several times, notably by Derrida, Judith Butler, Étienne Balibar, and Warren Montag. In the eulogy pronounced after Althusser's death, in 1990, Derrida connected Althusser's life and work with 'tragedy' – not only in the, say, 'pathetic' sense of the term, but with the tragic as explicitly theatrical, a theatricality that does not easily discriminate between the stage and the audience, between actors and spectators, between Louis and his contemporaries, especially where and when the world's stage displays its grandiosity and cruelty. 'Theatre' is omnipresent in Derrida's eulogy; here's a passage that mentions theatricality twice (of politics and its actors, of Althusser himself), and invokes the 'curtains' of 'draperies':



For at no time was I able to consider what was happening to him or through him, in these places that I still inhabit with him, as anything other than a string of upheavals, earthquakes, or awakenings of volcanoes, the singular or collective tragedies of our time – of the time that I, like you, will have shared with him. Never, in spite of everything that might have separated us or distanced us from one another, was I able or did I wish to observe, that is, with the neutrality of a spectator, what was happening to him or through him. . . . What I love most in him, no doubt because it was him, what fascinated me . . . was his sense of and taste for grandeur, for a certain grandeur, for the great theater of political tragedy where what is larger than life comes to occupy, mislead, or pitilessly break the private body of its actors.

Whenever public discourse about Althusser drops proper names like so many signposts or trails upon a territory to be occupied, the names that can be heard are, for example, those of Montesquieu or Rousseau, Marx or Lenin. Yet those who came close to Althusser, whether behind the great curtains of that political theater or by his bedside in the hospital, know they owe it to the truth to name others, Pascal, for example, and Dostoyevsky, and Nietzsche – and Artaud. (2001, 116–7)

Derrida ends his eulogy by reading a passage from Althusser’s 1962 text, ‘Le “Piccolo”, Bertolazzi et Brecht (Notes sur un théâtre matérialiste)’ – a passage which, Derrida claims, *chose* him rather than *he* chose it:

Yes, we are first united by this institution – the performance [*spectacle*] – but more deeply, by the same myths, the same themes, that govern us without our admission [*aveu*], by the same spontaneously lived ideology. Yes, even if it is *par excellence* that of the poor . . . we eat the same bread, we have the same angers, the same rebellions, the same deliriums (at least in memory where this imminent possibility incessantly stalks), if not the same exhaustion in the face of a time that no History moves. Yes . . . we have the same war at our gates, and a hair’s breadth from us, if not in us, the same horrible blindness, the same ashes in our eyes, the same earth in our mouths. We have the same dawn and the same night, we skirt the same abysses: our unconsciousness. We do share the same (hi)story [*histoire*] – and this is where it all begins. This is why, from the beginning [*dès le principe*], we are ourselves in advance the play itself – and then what does it matter whether we know how it ends, since it will never lead to anything but ourselves, that is, once again to our world. (Althusser 2005b, 150–1; 2005a, 150, translation modified)

While Derrida ends the quotation after ‘all begins’, I quoted a little more for reasons that will soon become clear. In ‘Althusser’s Dramaturgy and the Critique of Ideology’, Étienne Balibar reads this 1962 text along with other works by Althusser, leading him to conclude that theatricality – and especially the idea of world history as an ‘authorless theatre’ – ‘was certainly one of Althusser’s obsessions’ (Balibar 2015, 20; see also Althusser 2015, 349).

Balibar's essay shows how Althusser politically mobilised a specifically 'materialist theatre' in the 1960s, but also that a certain theatrical logic was to become, particularly in the 1970 essay on Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), a theoretical mainspring of Althusser's critique of ideology, perhaps its most powerful resource. Althusser's theoretical *dispositif*, in the ISAs essay, involves concepts of 'interpellation', 'scene' and 'mise en scène', 'roles', 'actors', to which Althusser refers collectively as his 'little theoretical theatre' (1971, 174) – 'notre petit théâtre théorique' (1995, 306). Balibar explains how effects of 'veil' or 'curtain' involved in the interpellation mechanism – interpellation always comes from behind, from behind the curtain – allow that the interpellating voice of this 'authorless theatre' – the so-called 'voice' of ideology – takes a seemingly transcendental position, forcing subjects to abide by the law of ideology as if they were themselves its author (2015, 14–15). And, commenting on Althusser and Butler, Balibar shows how this theatrical *dispositif* must be understood as virtually limitless:

Let me first recall that the circularity of the procedure of interpellation 'as subjects' and the theatrical 'element' in which the model is located, namely, the fact that such 'actions' as interpellation. . . and answer, response, responding, and assuming responsibility are clearly always taking place *on a stage*. This is the whole problem with the issue of the institutional 'conditions' of possibility of performative statements, namely, the fact that the speakers must *play their roles*. But here, with the question of the effectivity of interpellations, we are immediately forced to take into account a much wider spectrum of experiences, social forms, and institutions, where the theatrical stage at the same time occurs as a *general model* for the staging of discourse and as *one case* among many others, where the 'scenes' are not only located in theaters but also in civic spaces, agoras, tribunals, temples, private meetings, and ceremonies, or also metaphorically on the 'world's stage', which is the encompassing space for the staging of life and the assumption of roles, *personae* in Latin, which also means 'masks'. (2015, 12–13)

I interrupt the quotation to note that what Balibar describes here – a theatre which is at same time the *general model* to think the ideological and sociopolitical space, and *one case* in the series of experiences or institutions that make up that space – formally espouses the law of what Derrida calls a quasi-transcendental: a law according to which the transcendental condition of a series also belongs, paradoxically, to the series (Derrida 1998, 79). A certain theatricality would thus be the quasi-transcendental condition for thinking something like 'ideology'. I continue the quotation:

So we can see that Althusser (and Butler) are in fact taking part in a very long tradition, offering *variations*, as it were, of a theme, the *theatrum mundi*, that has a long existence in philosophy and art from the Stoics to Shakespeare and Descartes, and indeed in Hegel, Marx, Freud. (13)

This concern with a general theatricality of politics, of experience and perhaps ‘the world’, could suggest a continuity between Althusser and Derrida. Derrida arguably shared with Althusser an ‘obsession’ with the theatrical, running through his corpus, from early texts on Artaud ‘La parole soufflée’ and ‘Le théâtre de la cruauté et la clôture de la représentation’ (where Derrida also discusses ‘ideological theater’ [1978, 309]), or the 1968–69 seminar ‘L’écriture et le théâtre: Mallarmé/Artaud’, to three books in which ‘curtains’ play an important role: *La dissémination* (1972, 242–248; 364), *Glas* (notably through the expression ‘derrière le rideau’, which Derrida describes as a codename, a cryptonym for his own patronym, ‘Derrida’ [1974, 80]), and *La carte postale* (1980, see notably my epigraph). Let’s also mention *Spectres de Marx*, where theatrical motifs are marked and re-marked through readings of Shakespeare and of Marx on ideology and commodity fetishism, and the recently published seminar *Le parjure et le pardon*, in which Shakespeare’s quotation ‘The play’s the thing’ is a recurring leitmotiv.

I’ll return to this seminar in conclusion, but before getting there I want to examine more closely Althusser’s and Derrida’s conceptions of theatricality. In Althusser’s 1970 ISAs essay, the theatrical is meant to be the resource for a critique of ideology, of the scenes of ideology. In his stunning essay ‘Althusser’s Authorless Theatre’, Warren Montag (2015, 50) analyses Althusser’s conjoined use of *two* metaphors, theatre and machine – which Montag combines as ‘stage machinery’ – and shows how Althusser’s ‘little theoretical theatre’ allows him to analyse ideology not as fictional reflection or representation (*Vorstellung*), but as a powerful machinery whose power is maintained through the apparatuses, and whose materiality is sustained through real, effective, material acts performed by individual actors interpellated as subjects. Here, ideological ‘representation’ doesn’t mean ‘belief, false consciousness, or illusion’; ideology, while not strictly speaking ‘true’, is ‘a machine or machinery with a perfectly objective and material existence’ (ibid.). It is a *theatrical* representation, a performance, perhaps in a certain sense of *Darstellung* (Althusser 2015, 349).

Being material-effective, ideology can be approached scientifically. Interpellated subjects, through acts, performances, and rituals, realise and materialise ideology – an ideology which is in fact *nothing but* the materiality of those ‘acts’, ‘discourses’ or ‘practices’. As Montag (2021) shows, Althusser eschews the matter/ideology dualism to offer an expanded, differential conception of materiality:

I shall therefore say that, where only a single subject (such and such an individual) is concerned, the existence of the ideas of his belief is material in that *his ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject*. Naturally, the four inscriptions of the adjective ‘material’ in my proposition must be

affected by different modalities: the materialities of a displacement for going to mass, of kneeling down, of the gesture of the sign of the cross, or of the *mea culpa*, of a sentence, of a prayer, of an act of contrition, of a penitence, of a gaze, of a hand-shake, of an external verbal discourse or an ‘internal’ verbal discourse (consciousness), are not one and the same materiality. I shall leave on one side the problem of a theory of the differences between the modalities of materiality. (Althusser 1971, 169).

For Althusser, actors-subjects’ material acts can, at least in theory, be approached objectively from the perspective of a ‘subject-less’, ‘scientific’ discourse – that is, from the perspective of a Marxist-materialist theory of the State, of class domination and reproduction. Althusser suggests that the description of ISAs’ material functioning, of their role in mobilising material practices through rituals meant to reproduce the dominant ideology, of their inscription in the overall process of reproduction through their participation in the State and, in the last instance, in the class struggle – a class struggle waged both within *and* without the ISAs – allows us to not only become conscious of our ‘incessant (eternal) practice of ideological recognition’, but also to perhaps reach ‘the (scientific) *knowledge* of the mechanism of this recognition’. As Althusser (1971, 173) cautiously puts it: ‘from within ideology we have to outline a discourse which tries to break with ideology, in order to dare to be the beginning of a scientific (i.e. subject-less) discourse on ideology’. This suggests a paradoxical conception of ideology’s ‘outside’: ‘ideology *has no outside* (for itself), but at the same time. . . *it is nothing but outside* (for science and reality)’ (175).

This inside/outside topography, paradoxical as it is, marks a divergence between Althusser’s and Derrida’s respective conceptions of theatricality – a divergence not necessarily in its *effects*, that is, the ways theatricality is inscribed and at work in the texts (in the first part of this essay, I gave several examples of this inscription in Althusser’s texts), but at the very least in the ways the theatrical motif is *explicitly thematised* by them. In Althusser’s ISAs essay, this motif is tendentially (even teleologically) attached to the possibility of a scientific discourse on ideology and ISAs which supposes a theory of reproduction allowing us to account for ideology *conceptually*, and to overcome (‘dépasse’) what remains ‘metaphorical’ and ‘descriptive’ in Marx’s writings on ideology (1971, 135–40). Ideology objectively gives itself through its material manifestations, and this is why it can, at least tendentially, be made the object of theory. In contrast, Derrida’s thinking of theatricality – notably through the ‘closure of representation’ – implies a supplementary ‘fold’ in the curtains, another *ride* in the *rideaux*: it suggests that theatrical representations – acts, discourses, practices, performances, rituals, and so on – do not give themselves in a presence, ‘objectively’, but through traces that must ‘themselves’ be re-presented, reconstructed, interpreted. Despite their materiality, or perhaps because of it, ideological and theatrical representations – be they *Vorstellung* or *Darstellung* – resist full presence and direct intuition.

Since material acts, representations, performances cannot be intuited as such, their so-called ‘truth’ hinges on their differential reproducibility. To be legible, they must be re-presented; this signifies that they *can* and *must* be read. Iterability – differential repetition – is the first condition for their recognition and deciphering, perhaps their objectivation; but it also implies reconstructive interpretation, a certain interpretability and fictionality inseparable from the position of a scientific discourse on ideology, one that may always reproduce interpretative models inherited from the ideology it claims to take as its object. Reading is what promises *and* compromises objectivity, scientificity, and truth.

The fifth session of Derrida’s unpublished seminar ‘GREPH, le concept de l’idéologie chez les idéologues français’ (1974–75), is entirely dedicated to a close reading of Althusser’s ISAs essay. In a long prelude, Derrida stresses the progress made by the essay in analysing its object: by pluralising the Marxist notion of ideology through the ISAs and by highlighting its structural heterogeneity, Althusser allows us to account for ideological conflicts and strategic alliances that remain largely unpredictable, which contributes to complicating and refining simplistic mechanistic models of causality between infrastructure and superstructure. But Derrida recalls that Althusser’s essay *also* participates in a text in which it is irreducibly implicated, a text which has a long history of institutional, sociopolitical, material and theoretical struggles, one presupposing the French Ideologues and Hegelianism, and through them concepts such as production-reproduction, ideology, apparatus, institution, the State, and so on (see Mercier 2020 for more details). This textual complication and contamination – a citationality which also implies a certain complicity – is necessary: it is what *opens* ‘the possibility of reading’ the apparatus (for instance, in the form of a critical theory of ISAs), while also *limiting* this possibility, meaning that ‘the theory of the apparatus’ must also be, at least in part, ‘an effect of the apparatus’:

les concepts marxistes de production, d’idéologie, etc., même s’ils sont construits en rupture, en contradiction ou en déplacement par rapport à Hegel, comportent ce rapport à Hegel, au concept d’idéologie qui date de cette époque et se construit dans un certain rapport et aux philosophèmes et aux appareils d’enseignement dont ils sont inséparables. Ils sont énoncés, mis en place par des intellectuels, voire des professeurs de philosophie, dans un langage et une culture qui gardent nécessairement un lien avec ce qu’ils constituent comme leur objet, par exemple les Appareils Idéologiques d’État, et ce lien, quel qu’il soit, même s’il n’est pas simplement celui d’un produit à sa source productrice, ou d’une simple reproduction à l’appareil de production ou de reproduction, ce lien ouvre certes d’un côté la possibilité de lecture et d’analyse de l’appareil mais la limite *aussi*, [faisant] que par certains côtés la théorie de l’appareil, *quant à* l’appareil, est aussi pour une part un effet de l’appareil. (1974–75, session 5, 4–5)

This supplementary complication (let's call it *reading*) does not simply invalidate concepts or notions such as ideology, production-reproduction, or the class struggle. In incorporating them in a general text which overflows their conceptual borders, reading contributes to expanding those concepts, transforming the protocols of their interpretation, and multiplying strategies for reading. In the seminar, Derrida gives several illustrations of these effects of overflowing contamination with respect to the Marxist concept of ideology. I'll give three examples.

First, Derrida focuses attention on the question of reproduction in Althusser's wake. Althusser had stressed the importance of reproduction for thinking production and ideology from a Marxist-materialist perspective:

As Marx said, every child knows that a social formation which did not reproduce the conditions of production at the same time as it produced would not last a year. The ultimate condition of production is therefore the reproduction of the conditions of production. This may be 'simple' (reproducing exactly the previous conditions of production) or 'on an extended scale' (expanding them). Let us ignore this last distinction for the moment. (Althusser 1971, 127)

After reading this passage, and noting that Althusser leaves aside 'for the moment' the distinction between 'simple' and 'expanded' (or 'enlarged') reproduction (a distinction conceptualised in Marx's *Capital*), Derrida tarries a little longer with what expansion or 'élargissement' may imply for thinking reproduction: if the difference between 'simple' and 'enlarged' reproduction is not reducible to homogeneous extension, but welcomes differentiation and heterogeneity, then this possibility should be factored into reproduction's very logic; the possibility of differential 'élargissement' should not be considered as accidental to reproduction, as an adjacent question to be postponed indefinitely, but should rather be understood as a structural or necessary possibility in/of reproduction, modifying its very concept. But how can I identify the 'reproduced' object (for example, the dominant class ideology) while said object has otherwise been defined as differential and heterogeneous (through ISAs), and if the process of reproduction 'itself' is conceived as potentially transformative, heterogeneous? Am I not presupposing, through my reading, the relative homogeneity and self-presence of the 'reproduced' object, and of reproduction 'itself'? And what's left of the concept of reproduction once the very resources and functioning of said 'reproduction' have been defined as differential, dynamic, involving multiple relays and delays, agonistic relations between heterogeneous apparatuses, etc.? (On the topic see Mercier 2021b)

Second, Derrida interrogates Althusser's distinction between Repressive State Apparatus (singular) and Ideological State Apparatuses (plural), itself mirroring a theoretical distinction between two types of 'functioning': 'by violence' (*répression*) and 'by ideology'. Since Althusser himself describes the

two types as structurally mixed and impure, Derrida proposes to circumvent this residual dualism in favour of a differential economy of forces and/as resistances combining physical and nonphysical violences through *répression* and *refoulement* ('repression' in the psychoanalytic sense), themselves differentially distributed depending on institutions and their prevalent 'functioning'. Derrida's point, in Althusser's wake, is to multiply strategies for reading violence, while keeping in mind the conflictual dimension of difference and/as interpretation. What Derrida calls 'agonistic différance' (session 9) accounts for a vast array of intersectional or transcategorical violences, tensions, pressions, differences, as many tendential dominances preceding and exceeding class division 'as such' (notably the division between material and spiritual labour, which in turn produces ideology) and, following, the matter-ideology opposition and the class struggle strictly speaking.

Third, many sections in Derrida's 1974–75 seminar on ideology discuss the sexual division of labour, an often-overlooked aspect of Marxist theory, at least, Derrida claims, in its then dominant interpretations (for more details, see Mercier 2020). In the ninth session, Derrida, through close readings of *The German Ideology*, but also with reference to Althusser's ISAs essay, shows that Marxist concepts of production, reproduction, or ideology, themselves inherited through a long history of sociopolitical and ideological struggles, presuppose the existence of sexual divisions of labour, while systematically desexualising labour, production, reproduction, and by extension the whole space of politics, economy, and ideology – the entire 'reproductive system' of dialectics – thus obfuscating matters of sexual difference and related violences, as well as gendered forms of exploitations, expropriations, appropriations, conflicts, and exclusions, conscious or unconscious repressions, and neglecting the impact of familialist and racial politics in this system. In his reading of *The German Ideology*, Derrida stresses that sexual divisions of labour precede class divisions and oppositions such as ideology/materiality and theory/practice. Sexual divisions and their underlying conflicts precede and exceed these dialectical contradictions, and mark their undecidability, while remaining presupposed by those concepts, silently at work in the text of dialectics, crosscutting all labour and divisions of labour, production-reproduction, class divisions, ideology, and the class struggle – marking them all sexually. It follows that this sexual mark or re-mark must affect all ideality, all ideological representation and interpretative reading: interpretations (including readings aiming to propose a scientific, subject-less, discourse on ideology) can never be neutral – not only economically, politically, or ideologically, but also *sexually* – which is another way to say that reading, like labour, like text, is always selective, divided and dividing, differential, mobilised by singular desires and libidinal investments, and therefore always partly phantasmatic, or unconscious (Mercier 2020, 45–50; 2021b, 41–45).

Although Derrida (1974–75, session 9) describes several of these theoretical and practical limitations as hampering Marx's theory of ideology – even

hypothesising that these limitations may explain some of the strategic setbacks suffered by Marxist politics around those years, in the mid-1970s – he also emphasizes everything in ‘Marx’ which remains emancipatory, open to transformative interpretations. Reading reveals the self-deconstructiveness of Marx’s corpus – a non-closed collection of works to which Derrida refers, in the seminar, as ‘le texte-Marx’, thereby indicating that Marx’s philosophy is not homogeneous, not given, but that it gives itself (and remains) only to be read, interpreted, transformed, deconstructed – in short: inherited. Inheritance supposes the necessity of representative repetition, the supplementary fold of a contaminating implication, while also marking the loss of the unique, of the singular, of the ‘une fois’, signaling its impossible presentation or re-presentation, *connaissance* or *reconnaissance*, ‘as such’:

The menace of repetition is nowhere else as well organized as in the theater. Nowhere else is one so close to the stage as the origin of repetition, so close to the primitive repetition which would have to be erased, by detaching it from itself as if from its double. Not in the sense in which Artaud spoke of *The Theater and its Double*, but as designating the fold, the interior duplication which steals the simple presence of its present act from the theater, from life, etc., in the irrepressible movement of repetition. ‘One time’ is the enigma of that which has no meaning, no presence, no legibility. (Derrida 1978, 311–12)

The risk, therefore, is that a certain discourse on theatricality – one purporting to account, scientifically and objectively, for theatrical representations, material performances and rituals making up ideology – would end up repeating and confirming preconceptions governing its reading, starting, for example, with the relative homogeneity, self-identity, and limits of objects such as ‘ideology’, ‘dominant class ideology’, but also ‘the State’ or the process of reproduction ‘itself’ – objects which may be identified as such only through the homogenising lens of a reading that may always testify to an overflowing contamination between ideology and scientific discourse. In other words, the critique of ideology cannot *not* project onto its objects – the State, ideology, dominant ideology, and so on – models and categories it must share, at least partly, with said ideology, that is, with what is supposed to be the object of critique. But by trusting that something like ‘ideology’ might be delivered through the materiality of theatre and theatrical representation, by trusting in the effective power and presence of rituals and performance, one simply risks evacuating representation ‘itself’ – and, with it, innumerable difficulties related to the closure of representation: the heterogeneity of trace-structure and interpretative reading, the necessity of differential repetition, the fold of inheritance, the possibility of contamination and complicity, and so on. This can only ossify the scenes of ideology, reducing them to presentational acts and performances, freezing a certain state of present-being through its ideological manifestations and theatrical representations, and contribute to



impeding the mobility of strategy and resistance by containing the differential effects of reading, text, interpretation, and trace. This can also result in obfuscating violences, injustices, forceful exclusions or inclusions, in ignoring differences, heterogeneities, barely legible singularities which remain to be read, and possibly accounted for, but whose objective manifestation and scientific description *as such* must remain, strictly speaking, *impossible*, precisely to leave its chance to the event of *other* representations, readings, and interpretations, and of their deconstruction to come.

One must read and pass the curtain; but there is nothing behind the curtain – at least no ‘one’, nothing *present*, no last instance – only more text and more curtains. This brings out the idea that something like ‘representation’ has always-already begun, and cannot simply be opposed to presence, the presence of which it is supposedly the re-presentation:

Presence, in order to be presence and self-presence, has always already begun to represent itself, has always already been broached [*entamée*]. Affirmation itself must broach itself [*s’entamer*] in repeating itself. (Derrida 1978, 314, translation modified)

The necessity of repetition signifies both the inescapability of representation and the impossibility to contain said representation within limits, be they metaphysical, conceptual, political, ideological, scientific, strategic-materialist, and so on. The closure of representation designates the necessity of a representativity which can never, by the same token, be stabilised as such, *as* representation – that is, as the representation of another, supposedly nonrepresentative practice, objectivity, reality, or presence: ‘Rien derrière les rideaux’ (Derrida 1974, 59). Derrida interrogates the possibility of thinking the ‘essence’ and ‘limits’, the ‘outside’ of theatrical representation, of a representation which has always already begun, always been at play, and therefore remains virtually limitless, without however ever being identical to itself or to its own concept:

Because it has always already begun, representation therefore has no end. But one can think of the closure of that which is without end. Closure is the circular limit within which the repetition of difference infinitely repeats itself. That is to say its *playing* space. This movement is the movement of the world as play. (1978, 316, translation modified)

Not only does the closure of representation prevent the position of any presence claiming originariness and authenticity for itself; it also interrupts and challenges materialist discourses (for example, the late Althusser’s) claiming to sidestep the aporias of representation by generalizing the materiality of matter and positing the material existence and/or strategic effectiveness of the representational act ‘itself’, now conceived in its practicality, as material manifestation or performance, whatever its conscious

meaning, left to interpretations (to say nothing of the unconscious). Hence, the lexicon of theatricality would provide tools to describe how ideology is materially enacted, practiced, and how dominant ideology is factually reproduced and/or resisted through material performances and rituals, strategically participating in the class struggle in the last instance. Here, the practice of philosophy ‘is not (a) science, but class struggle in theory’ (Althusser 1976, 142). However, class antagonism – its ‘battlefield’ and ‘positions’, the material practices through which it manifests itself – can no more present itself than presence ‘itself’: its truth, meaning, or existence as such, including its strategic value on the agonistic scene, can be apprehended only through traces, and must therefore be attested, strategically re-presented, reconstructed, alleged before and beyond presence, which complicates the referent ‘class struggle’ – its ‘selfness’, so to speak, but also its strategic evaluation – while the class struggle remains, for Althusser, what determines ideology (and philosophy) in the last instance. As Althusser (2005a, 113) explains, this last instance never comes as such, remains forever impure, structurally overdetermined by ideological contexts and strategic reconstructions – suggesting a ‘last instance’ which itself remains to be deconstructed, that is perhaps nothing but deconstruction at work, the text’s uninterpretable interpretability. As if ‘the last instance’ could only designate the constant displacement of curtains – or perhaps what Althusser calls ‘the displacement of materiality’ (2006, 263).

Displacement and dislocation: by virtue of the supplementary fold of the closure of representation, every so-called ‘act’, ‘practice’, or ‘position’, fractured in its self-presence, becomes affected with *possible* fictionality, phantasmaticity; there is no guaranteed position or reality from which to interrogate ‘ideology’ and ‘representation’ as such.<sup>4</sup> The closure of representation thus speaks to the irreducibility of strategic reading, inheritance, differential interpretation, curtain-thinking; here, ‘ideology’ no longer designates an object or a relatively homogeneous field of experience materialised through specific acts, and expressing in the last instance the class struggle in its materiality – that is, as Althusser says, what *dominates* in every conjuncture (Althusser 2006, 263) – but perhaps the text’s structural secrecy, its heterogeneity and unconditional resistance, mandated by the trace-structure and its injunction to read.<sup>5</sup> ‘Text’ signals the impossibility of isolating and exiting ideology, as well as the irreducible possibility of being contaminated by its law – perhaps through what Althusser (1976) calls ‘*dévi*ation’ or ‘*dévi*ance’; but, since interpretative reading, mobilised by text and secrecy, supposes ‘an interpretation that transforms the very thing it interprets’, this transformative (deconstructive) gesture must by definition compose with performative invention, storytelling and fictionality. It is therefore deprived of the relative safety net provided by what Althusser (1976, 107; 142–50) defines as strategic ‘rectifications’, ‘corrections’, or ‘adjustments’ – deprived even of the somewhat reassuring logics of class struggle, and

strategic thinking. The closure of representation, as it implies the irreducible possibility of fictionality and phantasmaticity – notions which directly flow from text and the trace-structure – expands and dramatises the strategic dimension of ‘theory’ dear to Althusser, precipitating the text into a strategy without end, without finality, a spectral forcefield marked by undecidability and a certain impower which, while radically disrupting conventional concepts of strategic thinking, also points to the residual teleology present in Althusserian theoretical-practical notions such as ‘positions’, ‘tendencies’, ‘rectifications’ or ‘corrections’, ‘deviations’, ‘correctness’, or ‘last instance’, including in their self-critical reformulation in strategic terms (Althusser 1976, 142–50; see also 2006, 288). Derrida’s ‘jeu’ (play) involves performance, representation, positions, struggle, ruse, and strategy, but cannot be reduced to those – speaking as it does to a structural and invincible heterogeneity, an unconditional force of resistance, an impossibility resisting power, knowledge, and selfness before and beyond strategic positionality.

What remains perhaps miraculous, here, is that this arid impossibility is also what propels interpretations and narratives, engendering phantasms and provoking the multiplication of scenes, the proliferation of strategies for deconstruction and reading: as many stories.

Stories that can be transformative – perhaps revolutionary.

Curtains.

## ‘ce théâtre de l’impossible’

I now return to my initial question on the debt. In the recently published seminar *Le parjure et le pardon*, Derrida exposes a series of aporias that make forgiveness strictly speaking impossible. One of the aporias has to do with manifestation and theatricality. Derrida explains that forgiveness both *requires* and *excludes* its theatrical representation or manifestation on a ‘scene’:

Le pardon en appelle à la théâtralité mondiale (un pardon doit se manifester et ne pas rester secret, il faut qu’il soit déclaré dans une scène dont le tribunal virtuel et le jugement ne sont pas absents) et en même temps il exclut la visibilité, la manifestation, voire la publicité, là où il devrait rester hétérogène, sinon à la justice, du moins au droit, au judiciaire, au pénal. . . . Il reste que même là où le théâtre devrait être exclu, il insiste, et ce à quoi nous nous intéressons au fond, c’est ce théâtre impossible, ce théâtre de l’impossible, ce théâtre aux prises avec l’impossible théâtralisation qu’il s’agit justement de mettre en scène, en inventant une autre scène, la déthéâtralisation du théâtre ou la théâtralisation du non théâtralisable. (Derrida 2020, 230)

Derrida’s *insisting* theatricality thus gestures towards a ‘theatre of the impossible’: a theatricality without manifestation, or at least one that exceeds

the manifestation of the *possible* – perhaps suggesting something like a representation without presence or representation. This relates to an impossible double bind: on the one hand, the event of forgiveness requires to be somewhat ‘declared’, to be represented and acknowledged, so that forgiveness can be asked for, and possibly granted. On the other hand, the theatrical representation of forgiveness, because it manifests, re-presents forgiveness on a scene, on a stage, can always resemble a staged performance, a performative ‘act’, a ‘mise en scène’ of forgiveness, hence a theoretical discourse of justification or self-justification involving a certain narrative, a *récit*, some act of ‘storytelling’. I ask for forgiveness, on a stage, but through this already somewhat theatrical act, my asking can always be (read as) an artificial representation, a narrative, a way of exculpating myself. In asking for forgiveness, I enter the stage of representation, I act and explain my act. It is already incorporated into a narrative, an economy of the excuse: I somewhat excuse myself. I do it through a scene always involving a certain autobiographical gesture. The *mea culpa* is already a narrative, an act of ‘storytelling’ that can be read and interpreted, reincorporated within the scene of a virtual trial: this gesture can be interpreted as exculpating or as inculcating, for the defense or for the accusation, in view of a virtual judgement, a tribunal, the State’s or perhaps God’s ‘himself’.

This economic appropriation may always happen as soon as forgiveness must be represented: representation is the condition for both the authentic and the inauthentic, truth and fiction, and for their irreducible contamination, even in the apparently most sincere of testimonies, *repentirs*, or autobiographical gestures. Through writing, through the closure of representation, the event of forgiveness (its ‘one time’) is exposed to differential repetition, readings and interpretations, to the text-machine and to the event of (mis)reading and (mis)interpretation. This is why forgiving, in the strict sense of the term, should remain foreign to representation, narrativity, and the autobiographical. If someone’s crime is inscribed, represented within a chain of causality, if it is narrated, incorporated into an autobiographical narrative, a *récit* which exposes, explains it, then there is virtually no fault, no guilt: the one asking for forgiveness is already somewhat excused, their fault, represented, becomes understandable – and there is no forgiveness worthy of the name. So, the closure of representation opens the possibility of forgiveness by making it possible to represent the crime, the fault, the very scene of *repentance*; but it also makes forgiveness strictly speaking impossible by already incorporating it into an economy of representation, recognition, some narrative already involving some knowledge and causality, some possible explanation. The representativity supposed in all writing, in all ‘auto-hetero-biographical’ writing – and all writing, in this sense, is auto-hetero-biographical – remains the condition of possibility and impossibility for something like forgiveness to happen, to arrive. To be forgiven, the crime must be represented, inscribed, registered; but it is thereby already ‘re-

presented', substitutable, replaced, displaced, explained away through causality: representable, explicable, perhaps knowable, it is virtually exculpated, excused – and forgiveness itself becomes superfluous, hence its impossibility. To illustrate this, Derrida offers an example which, I believe, cannot *not* remind us of Althusser:

[Si vous dites:] 'J'arrive en retard parce qu'il y avait une panne de métro, je m'excuse, excusez-moi.' Ce n'est pas de votre faute. Ou bien, alors, ça peut aller très loin: 'Je ne savais plus ce que je faisais, je l'ai secoué un peu trop fort, je l'ai pris à la gorge et je n'ai plus compris... Ce n'était plus moi, et puis il est mort ou elle est morte, ce n'est pas moi, je m'excuse.' Parce qu'il y a une chaîne de causalités, comme ça, qui explique, et donc l'excuse disculpe de ce point de vue-là. . . . Si je demande pardon dans des conditions telles que ma manière de demander pardon m'excuse, donc me disculpe, il n'y a même plus de réconciliation à chercher parce que 'y a pas d'mal'. . . . C'est un mal qu'on pourrait toujours expliquer, donc on peut en rendre compte, on peut en rendre raison, il y a eu ce mal, il y a eu ce crime, il y a eu cette mort parce qu'il y a eu une série de causalités, les experts ou psychiatres vont pouvoir en rendre compte ou bien toutes sortes d'experts, de gens qui ont le savoir, vont pouvoir déterminer quelle causalité a conduit à tel mal, à telle souffrance, à telle blessure, à ce qu'on interprète comme une souffrance ou une blessure. Mais comme le savoir rend compte de cette causalité, le mal n'est plus le mal, le mal est un effet, l'effet d'une cause. (Derrida 2019, 212)

How should we *read* such a scene?

Someone in a hurry – someone perhaps ill-intentioned – would probably read this passage, and ask: Does it mean that Derrida never forgave Althusser? that he *could not* forgive him?

Perhaps. One cannot exclude this possibility. But that would be to forget that Derrida explicitly says that forgiveness *is*, and *must remain, impossible* for it to have the chance to happen or arrive, *pour avoir la chance d'arriver*. Structurally heterogeneous to the selfness of a self, the experience of forgiveness supposes an experience of the impossible, unrepresentable and unrepresentable, radically secret and unconscious, even for the one who forgives, for any ipseity, for any 'I'. Forgiveness remains beyond knowledge and beyond power; it is therefore foreign to any ontological judgement on truth and being. There is no 'truth' of forgiveness, if 'truth' supposes the being-present of an act – an act that could always be an 'act'. Forgiveness remains undecidable in a presence, foreign to the scene of judgement.

What remains to be done, therefore, is to *read*, to patiently decipher the debt, to interpret and perhaps transform what was given to us as a complex, heterogeneous legacy. As Derrida says in his eulogy to Althusser, let's not hurry to *judge* – that is to say, to *misjudge*:

I dream of addressing those who will come after him, or already after us, those who, as can be seen by more than one sign, unfortunately, are too much in a hurry to understand, interpret, classify, fix, reduce, simplify, close off, and judge – and thus are certain to misunderstand, whether we are talking about this most singular destiny or about the trials of existence, thought, and politics, which can never be separated. I would ask them to stop for a moment, to take the time to listen to our time (for we had no other), to decipher as patiently as possible everything in our time that was marked and promised in the life, work, and name of Louis Althusser. Not only because the scale of this destiny should command respect (as well as a respect for the time – our time – from which these other generations come) but also because the still open wounds, the scars or hopes that were ours and that they will recognize in this time, are sure to teach them something essential of what remains to be heard, read, thought, and done. (Derrida 2001, 117–8)

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<sup>2</sup> It would be interesting to analyze the colonial implications of this idea of a lost ‘paradise’ located spatially in Algeria, and temporally in Althusser’s childhood, under the protection and tutelage of the patriarchal figure of the grandfather. Althusser depicts a phantasmatic wilderness, the lost paradise of the colony seemingly allowing the free play of sexual desires and metaphors, beyond dualisms and oppositions. It is explicitly described or staged as a place and time of ‘freedom’, ‘equality’, and innocence – a sinless Eden, ‘terre vierge’ without prohibitions, morality, or constraining ideology.

<sup>3</sup> On the secret, text, and storytelling, see Derrida 1993, 61 (my translation): ‘*There is secrecy* [Il y a du secret]. One can always speak about it, that is not enough to break it. One can speak about it ad infinitum, tell stories about it, utter all the discourses which it puts to work and the stories which it unleashes or enchains [*déchaîne ou enchaîne*], because the secret often makes one think of secret stories [*histoires*] and it even gives one a taste for them’. If I had more space, I would like to compare Derrida’s ‘taste’ for secrecy – inseparable, then, from a taste for storytelling – with what Althusser says about materialism and ideology in his autobiography. Althusser defines materialist philosophy as the refusal of storytelling: ‘I tried to reconcile this radical criticism of philosophy as ideological sham (the objective: to stop telling oneself stories [*ne plus se raconter d’histoires*], which is the only “definition” of materialism I have ever subscribed to) with my experience of philosophical practice’ (2007, 195; 1993, 169, translation modified. See also 1993, 221). Is it coincidental that this same motto (‘*ne plus se raconter d’histoires*’), this refusal of storytelling, is associated a few pages later to the law of the father, in a singular scene of sexual difference?: ‘This violent refusal to “tell oneself stories”, this wordless brutality – which I felt belonged to a father whom I had missed and who in any case had never initiated me to it, who had not taught me that the world was not ethereal but was a world of physical and other forms of struggle – in the end I was becoming bold and free enough to accept its reality and make it mine. Was I not finally and truly becoming my own father, that is to say a man?’ (2007, 201–202; 1993, 175, translation modified). The whole chapter would deserve a close analysis.

<sup>4</sup> In ‘History of the Lie’, Derrida (2002, 67–68) seems to want to preserve something of the concept of ideology, at least as ‘negative topology’: ‘Despite its fundamental obscurity, despite the philosophical or theoretical limits of the discourses that have sometimes deployed it, the concept of ideology all the same marks a *site*, the *place* of that which we are seeking to determine here. Even if this determination remains a sort of negative topology, it is very valuable. It takes us farther, beyond consciousness and intentional knowledge, at least in the plenitude of its self-presence or self-identity: in the direction of a locus of nontruth that is neither that of error, ignorance, or illusion nor that of the lie or of lying to oneself. Ideology, in the Marxist sense, in principle is none of these. Even if the word and concept of ideology risk remaining still inscribed in the space that they exceed, there is no doubt that they point toward the place of this problematic to come – which would be rooted in neither a truth of biblical revelation nor a philosophical concept of truth.’ In the same text, Derrida (2002, 28) gestures towards a thinking of phantasmaticity and fictionality exceeding the opposition between truth and falsity: ‘No more than myth, fable and phantasm are doubtless not truths or true statements as such, but neither are they errors or deceptions, false witnesses or perjuries.’ On a certain irreducible phantasmaticity in and of truth, reality, and materiality, see Mercier (2021a).

<sup>5</sup> It is from this unconditional resistance of text, this ‘force of resistance’, that the question of Derrida’s ‘materialism’ – or, rather, what he calls, in a reading of Paul de Man, ‘materiality

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without matter’ – could be raised, especially around everything that concerns ‘*materiality*’ as ‘a very useful generic name for all that resists appropriation’ (2002, 150–4). See also Peggy Kamuf’s wonderful essay ‘Ma’ (2015).