

THE MYSTERIOUS GRAND BANQUET OF PARDON
ACCORDING TO VLADIMIR JANKELEVITCH
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Abstract: This article analyses the possibility of pardon and its inner dynamics from the perspective of Vladimir Jankelevitch, which is Judeo-Christian. The study is done in five interrelated parts. The first introduces the enigmatic place of pardon in Jankelevitch's thought, and the reasons for the apparent incoherence in his discourses on pardon. The second analyses the three organ-obstacles that make this act nearly impossible. The next two sections examine the three imprints of impure and pure pardon, respectively. The concluding section presents the infinite dialectic between pardon and evil, neither one stronger than the other. Pardon is an inexplicable, mysterious grand banquet, manifesting itself in all its gratuitousness as a sudden and spontaneous event, in a face-to-face encounter between the transgressor and the transgressed.

Keywords: Evil; Fault; Memory and Forgetting; Pure and Impure pardon

"The rose is without why; it blooms simply because it blooms"
Angelus Silesius

The objective of this article is to study the possibility of pardon and its inner dynamics from the perspective of Vladimir Jankelevitch, a French Jewish philosopher and musicologist. Often known as "the philosopher of pardon", Jankelevitch's discourses stem from the moral bankruptcy during and after the *Shoah*, especially in the deafening silence surrounding the death camps, and the staggering inhumane debate around the imperative of forgiveness.

The study follows a fivefold path. The first introduces the enigmatic place of pardon in Jankelevitch's thought, and the reasons for the apparent

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incoherence in his discourses on this concept. The second analyses the three organ-obstacles that make this act nearly impossible. The next two sections study the three imprints of impure and pure pardon, respectively, and the dangerous travesty of pseudo-pardon as pure pardon. The concluding section presents the infinite dialectic between pardon and evil, neither one stronger than the other. Pardon is an inexplicable, mysterious grand banquet, manifesting itself in all its gratuitousness as a sudden and spontaneous event, in a face-to-face encounter between the transgressor and the transgressed.

A call to experience

Two radically irreconcilable ideas coexist in Vladimir Jankelevitch's reflection on pardon: one vehement and biting polemical, and the other philosophical. These thoughts are found in his books, *Should We Pardon Them?*¹ and *Pardon*². To understand this discrepancy, of which Jankelevitch himself is aware of, it is necessary to study the context of these two works, and how the question 'Is it necessary to pardon?' is analysed. Moreover, contextual meaning is crucial to understand the philosophy of Jankelevitch.

In the text *Should We Pardon them?* Jankelevitch emphatically protests against the statute of limitations, that is the formal discharge promised to Nazi war criminals after a well-defined period of twenty years. Right from the beginning, this text questions critically the prescribed number of years that are necessary for the unforgivable to become miraculously forgivable! *Should we Pardon Them?* is a memorial to the victims of the *Shoah*, to all those who are dead, and who could not defend themselves. It is Jankelevitch's soul stirring cry of anguish and indignation, as well as of his conviction and hope; a text that pleads *against* forgiveness; a testimony of pardon refused.

¹ Vladimir Jankelevitch, *L'imprescriptible. Pardonner ? Dans l'honneur et la dignité*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1986. Translated as "Should we pardon them?" Vladimir Jankelevitch and Ann Hobart, *Should we pardon them*, *Critical Inquiry*, n. 3 (1996), pp. 552-572.

The English translation of the title of this book alone is used here. All translations of this book, as with the other French books and articles of Jankelevitch cited in this article, are my own.

² Vladimir Jankelevitch, *Le pardon*, Aubier Montaigne, Paris 1967.

Should We Pardon Them? is a very difficult text to digest. It denounces and breaks the world's silence in the face of the insurmountable horror of the death camps, condemns the attitude of the "professors of forgiveness" who ask the Jews to forgive rather than inviting the guilty to ask pardon. It is in this text that Jankelevitch challenges his German colleagues who remained mute in the face of the atrocities, more bothered about the "there-being" and the "existential project". He is nauseated by the politics of financial compensation adopted by the Germans, an indemnity that does not replace the request for forgiveness or regret on their part.

The abyss of evil is visible in every word of the text, in the devastating horror it discusses³. This text is the testimony of a suffering human, an escapee whose every moment is hell. But the pages are not "litanies of bitterness"⁴; rather, they are a clarion call to fight against forgetting, recalling one's duty to remember. Thus, whenever we read Jankelevitch's reflections on forgiveness⁵, it is imperative to remember that they are rooted in the reality of Nazi extermination. His thoughts are birthed from the pangs of this "event", a personal discourse based on his conviction and powerfully related to his own situation that of a resistance fighter. He struggles against the amalgamation of the sublimity of pardon with its fraudulent counterparts: the excuse; intellectual understanding; oblivion in time. To these three masqueraders that is often identified or understood in daily lives as forgiveness, Jankelevitch gives several names including "impure pardon".

In stark contrast, the treatise *Pardon* is purely philosophical. Here the question of pardon is analysed from the perspective of Jewish and Christian ethics. The concept of prescription and the factories of extermination are ever looming shadows, but they are not the starting point of Jankelevitch's

³ We read in different parts of the book: "orchestras played Schubert while prisoners were hanged"; "women's hair was harvested"; "gold fillings were removed from the teeth of corpses"; "soaps made from the corpses of deportees"; "lampshades were made from the skins of deportees"; "children were killed with phenol injected in their heart, and experiments were carried out on pregnant women"; "Jewish children were massacred en masse and then their little shoes were retrieved"; "German officers had fun choosing little Jewish children as living targets in their shooting exercises".

⁴ Vladimir Jankelevitch, *L'imprescriptible. Pardonner? Dans l'honneur et la dignité*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1986, p. 56.

⁵ I would like to note here that I am using the words 'pardon' and 'forgiveness' synonymously.

reflection. If *Should We Pardon Them?* is the text of pardon refused, *Pardon* speaks of the possibility of pardon, even of one's duty to pardon. This obligation to forgive is not seen as an imperative, as a one-must-forgive; but is discussed as a capacity, a one-has-the-ability-to-forgive.

The organ-obstacle of forgiveness: the transgression and the fault

The obstacle that prevents pardoning, or makes it strenuous, is the affront suffered by the offended, or the fault committed by the transgressor. Jankelevitch calls it the "organ-obstacle", a concept that he borrowed from Henri Bergson. The word refers to the tragedy of the limits of a human, like that of forgiveness, especially in those instances where the *ipseity* (selfhood) is annihilated. In the case of the affront suffered, the offended person overcomes the obstacle either through love and philanthropy, or through resentful reaction and passionate aggression. In the case of transgression, the victim resorts to sanctions and judicial mediation.

In contrast, pardon calls for a renunciation: renunciation of anger, resentment, aggression, sanctions, and legal recourse. But when confronted with the obstacle-organ, pardon remains difficult, a challenge, and an ordeal; in some cases, pardon becomes almost impossible, even a caricature. Jankelevitch describes three of these moments, which he refers to as the three moments of the unpardonable: 1) crimes against humanity; 2) not asking for pardon coupled with the lack of regret; 3) the absence of victims. The refusal to pardon in these three situations are well argued and philosophically justified.

The first organ-obstacle of pardon is crimes against humanity, with racial genocide its most heinous form. This unmotivated, inexpiable, and irreparable crime, which Jankelevitch terms as "metaphysical", denies the very essence of humanity: that which makes a human a human. In crimes against humanity, it is the very being of a person that is annihilated, a denial of existence itself. The victims "are not accused of professing something, they are accused of being"⁶. By thus targeting at the very selfhood of a human being, crimes against humanity are, as Derrida says, "against the power of forgiveness

⁶ Vladimir Jankelevitch, *L'imprescriptible. Pardonner ? Dans l'honneur et la dignité*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1986, p. 22.

itself⁷. When confronted with the memory of such a crime, a good and reasonable human becomes indignant; fights tooth and nail against oblivion and prosecutes the criminals so that they assume their responsibility. This is the reason why Jankelevitch does not accept the statute of limitations for crimes against humanity. For such crimes are the result of a will, a long-matured intention, and a conscious decision to strip a human of its identity⁸. It is the most diabolical machination that human history has ever known.

Faced with this irreparable crime, Jankelevitch radically rejects all statutory limitations – the official or legal oblivion – which he calls “the temporal palliative”. Could a simple passage of time have the capacity to erase the monstrosity of acts committed out of free will? Why after a period of twenty years? Why not at the very moment of the offence? This “calendar forgiveness” according to which it is “legitimate to hold it against a criminal for twenty years; but from the twenty-first year onwards one becomes resentful”⁹ is ridiculous and absurd. He explains:

when an act denies the essence of human as human, the prescription that would tend to absolve him in the name of morality contradicts morality itself. Is it not contradictory and even absurd to invoke forgiveness here? To forget this gigantic crime against humanity would be a new crime against the human race¹⁰.

“Pardoning died in the death camps,” Jankelevitch writes, and “there is only a single resource left: remembrance, recollection. There where you cannot ‘do’ anything, you can at least *feel*, endlessly”¹¹. This feeling-with is not a resentment, or a grudge. It is neither a refusal, nor a protest against an all too easy amnesia, against the collapse of “our heritage of memories”. On the other hand, it is a steadfast fidelity to values and victims. It is a duty towards the

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Foi et savoir. Le siècle et le pardon. Entretien avec Michel Wieviorka*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 2000, p. 109.

⁸ A telling example is the narrative of Magda Lafon, a Jewish deportee: “When I looked at an S.S., I felt that I was nothing. So, I learned not to look at them so as not to be struck by that deadly look... Faced with the S.S., I was ashamed to be me; I was depersonalized, in rags. They would bludgeon us and tell us that we were ‘nothing’.” Magda Lafon, ‘Aimez vos ennemis’, du pluriel au singulier, “Approches”, n. 106 (2001), p. 42.

⁹ Vladimir Jankelevitch, *Le pardon*, Aubier Montaigne, Paris 1967, p. 48.

¹⁰ Id., *L’imprescriptible. Pardonner? Dans l’honneur et la dignité*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1986, p. 25.

¹¹ *Ivi*, p. 62.

dead, a duty to remember, a duty to be faithful to their memory. While Jankelevitch initially rejected what he calls “calendar forgiveness”, he later nuances his position by adding a crucial element: the request for forgiveness. Its absence and the lack of regret is the second organ-obstacle against pardon. From his viewpoint, it is impossible to forgive when there is no request, no acknowledgement of the fault committed. Words, remorse, repentance have the power to pave the way towards pardon and help in the process of healing.

In this context, it is worth remembering the case of the newly formed Republic of South Africa, which rejected a ‘national amnesia’ in apartheid crimes, but instead set up the ‘Truth and Reconciliation Commission’ (TRC). When the TRC rejected statutory limitations, it did so not as a denial of forgiveness, but for the possibility of forgiveness, because “there is no future without forgiveness”. This is also the title of Desmond Tutu’s book wherein he explains the TRC thus: accepting the option of national amnesia would have been wrong. It would have had the effect of penalizing the victims of apartheid a second time, by refusing to take into consideration something that was an integral part of their identity, of their very being¹².

In an interview with Renée de Tryon-Montalembert, Jankelevitch explains that this request for forgiveness should come from the heart. The depth and immensity of Hitler’s crime lies in the absence of repentance and words of understanding¹³. And again in *Should We Pardon Them?* we read:

We have waited a long time for a word, a single word, a word of understanding and sympathy... this fraternal word, how we had hoped for! Of course, we did not expect them to implore our forgiveness... But the word of understanding, that we would have welcomed with gratitude, with tears in our eyes¹⁴.

It was this word of understanding that he expected from his fellow academicians and German moralists. It is important to remember that Jankelevitch did not condemn the Germans collectively; he was aware of the presence of German democrats in the death camps; he also recognized those isolated individual gestures asking for pardon, like that of Willy Brandt before the Warsaw ghetto memorial. But these gestures were the work of a small

¹² Desmond Mpilo Tutu, *No future without forgiveness*, Doubleday, New York 1999, p. 29.

¹³ Renée De Tryon-Montalembert, Entretien avec le professeur Jankelevitch, “La vie spirituelle”, n. 619 (1977), p. 182.

¹⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 51-52.

elite. On the other hand, a whole people were responsible, directly or indirectly, mute or accomplices. His expectation: a great movement of profound repentance from all Germans¹⁵.

But mere remorse or a guilty conscience is not sufficient to forgive. What gives meaning and purpose to forgiveness is the distress and abandonment of the guilty party: “When the culprit is fat, well fed, prosperous, enriched by the ‘economic miracle’, forgiveness is a sinister joke. No! Forgiveness is not for pigs and their sows”¹⁶. In order to obtain forgiveness, one must confess one’s guilt and freely ask for forgiveness, without alluding to any mitigating circumstance¹⁷.

The third and final organ-obstacle for forgiveness is the absence of victims. The intriguing question here is: can one pardon in the place of another? In other words, can a survivor pardon in the name of people who had given no such authorization, especially on behalf of those who are dead? Can someone with no direct connection to a tragedy pardon in the place of a victim?¹⁸

¹⁵ Renée De Tryon-Montalembert, Entretien avec le professeur Jankelevitch, “La vie spirituelle”, n. 619 (1977), p. 182.

¹⁶ Vladimir Jankelevitch, *L'imprescriptible. Pardonner ? Dans l'honneur et la dignité*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1986, p. 50. Does not this expectation, distress, and dereliction of the guilty remind us of the traditional acts of penance in Judaism?

¹⁷ In stark contrast, for the TRC in South Africa, what was essential was neither contrition nor remorse, but unabridged confession and acceptance of moral responsibility for the act committed. Confession of one’s crimes helps in giving forgiveness, as shown in the film ‘Death and the Maiden, and quoted by Desmond Tutu in his book *There is No Future without Forgiveness*, where the torturer first denies his actions and finally confesses them: The torturer’s “denial hit at the core of her being, at her integrity, at her identity, and these were all tied up intimately with her experiences, with her memory. Denial subverted her personhood. She was in a real sense her memory, as someone who has Alzheimer’s disease is no longer quite the same person we knew when she or he possessed all her or his faculties.” Desmond Mpilo Tutu, *No future without forgiveness*, Doubleday, New York 1999, p. 30.

¹⁸ This contentious question is taken up by Simon Wiesenthal in *The Sunflower*: “At the end of June 1942, in Lemberg, under strange circumstances, a young, dying SS man confessed his crimes to me and told me that he wanted to die in peace after having obtained a pardon from a Jew. I thought I had to deny him this pardon... Obsessed by this story, I decided to tell it, and at the end of my manuscript, I ask the question which, even today, because of its political, philosophical, or religious significance, deserves an answer: was I right or was I wrong?” Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower: on the possibilities and limits of forgiveness*, H. A. Pichler (trans), Schocken, New York 1998, p. 147.

Jankelevitch answers this challenging question with an emphatic “No!” He not only denies this possibility, but he also declares that he personally cannot do so. To forgive in the place of the other is to be unfaithful to the mourning process of the victims and their families; to rob the family of the right to mourn; to usurp the right to forgive. It is a bad action and encourages crime. Those who have not suffered ask the family of the victims to forgive for charity’s sake. Jankelevitch finds this request by the “professors of pardon”, these “advocates of indulgence” offensive. In his eyes, charity is also understanding and respecting the feelings of the other, treating the victims with respect, being considerate to their wounds. He wonders where the “professors of pardon” and the “advocates of indulgence” were when the atrocities were committed. Pardoning is in the realm of the freewill of an individual; no one has the right to grant it in the name of another.

There is an unsettling passage in Dostoyevsky’s philosophical novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, where Ivan one of the brothers denounces the very possibility of pardoning in the place of another. The scene centres on an eight-year-old serf child being mauled to death by hunting hounds in front of his own mother at the order of the general. Narrating the incident, Ivan states:

I want to forgive. I want to embrace. I don’t want more suffering... I don’t want the mother to embrace the oppressor who threw her son to the dogs! She dare not forgive him! Let her forgive him for herself, if she will, let her forgive the torturer for the immeasurable suffering of her mother’s heart. But the sufferings of her tortured child she has no right to forgive! Is there in the whole world a being who has this right?¹⁹

When confronted with crimes against humanity, or when there is no regret or request for forgiveness, or when the victims are dead, only symbolic gestures will suffice: deciding never to visit Germany and even less to Austria, as did Levinas; not to accept compensation from the Germans; boycotting German

It must be noted that Wiesenthal was not a direct victim of Karl, the young SS man. But as a Jew, Wiesenthal belongs to the “same community of destiny”, and through Wiesenthal, Karl wishes to ask his victims for forgiveness. Several editions of this text have been published: each edition is followed by a series of letters from various personalities with their answers to Wiesenthal’s question: whether the living has the right to forgive on behalf of those who are dead?

¹⁹ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The brothers Karamazov*, Vintage Books, New York 1950, p. 239.

products... These acts may seem unreasonable or impotent, but it is the least that can be done in the face of what has happened.

Impure pardon: an automatic dispenser of graces and indulgences

It is difficult to form a substantive theory of pardon. What is easier is to give an apophatic philosophy of pardon (saying what pardon is not), because true pardon is so fleeting, so impalpable, so rare, so controversial that it does not lend itself to description. It is an exceptional, extraordinary, and rare event; its true value and possibility revealed only by terrible trials. Jankelevitch does not take forgiveness lightly. He describes it as the “mysterious grand banquet of pardon”, its rarity being an occasion for a solemn celebration²⁰. Nevertheless, forgiveness is part of our regular daily life experience, and even though it is difficult to give, it is the sublime in everyday life, lending it grandeur. And it is precisely this everydayness of pardon that makes us misunderstand and abuse it.

Therefore, Jankelevitch denounces all amalgamation of pardon with indifference, clemency, forgetting, transformation, ageing... Referring to the stoic clemency of the wise man, wrongly equated with pardon, he writes:

The wise man, hiding in the citadel by his freewill, ignores the vulnerability of the weak and becomes, under insult, more insensitive than a stone. Are the stones on the path vulnerable? It is beautiful to win when one is defeated! Stoic clemency has never left this armour of sublime indifference²¹.

Swallowing the offence is also not a mark of pure pardon, for the true motive in this case is self-perfection, or even self-righteousness:

Swallowing and assimilation require more practical skill, more elasticity, and utilitarian malleability than generosity. ... The one who turns the other cheek, not for the love of humans as Jesus had taught, but to exercise his will and his resistance to vindictive temptation, to ease his adaptability skills, to embrace integration, to assimilate food

²⁰ Renée De Tryon-Montalembert, Entretien avec le professeur Jankelevitch, “La vie spirituelle”, n. 619 (1977), p. 186.

²¹ Vladimir Jankelevitch, *Le pardon*, Aubier Montaigne, Paris 1967, p. 15.

that is specifically indigested into an ever-richer totality, such a one is sly and voracious. His objective is to exploit everything, to devour everything, and to let nothing be lost, not even the effect of a slap. Is this forgiveness? No, this captive and annexationist synthesis is not open to the other: it is only about me, my gain, my beautiful soul. Hypocrisy and complacency, *philautia* and *pleonexia* are the true ulterior motives of closed pardon. In the language of Saint Francis de Sales, this simile-pardon would rightly be called ‘spiritual avarice’²².

The word ‘pardon’ is thus misused by frivolous people who have an indirect interest in it; these people, for whom “the need for forgiveness or the call for forgiveness simply reflects sordid, petty, very down-to-earth interests”²³ have made a sublime and noble word superficial. As for the “professors of pardon” who hasten to resume relations with the Germans, Jankelevitch asks whether this desire is not rather motivated by economic or commercial reasons, or to “exculpate themselves when they travel or go to the thermal baths in Germany”²⁴. There is need to resume trade and business relations, and it is important not to wallow in anger and bitterness. There is need for prescription, amnesty, or presidential pardon to rehabilitate the transgressor and to offer promise of a new life. What Jankelevitch contests is using the word ‘pardon’ for these necessities.

Impure pardon, also called ‘pseudo’, ‘simile’, ‘relative’, ‘closed’, ‘apocryphal’, ‘interim’, ‘in-time’ pardon, has apparently the same effects as pure pardon, as long as its intentional impulse is not considered. Pardon becomes impure when it is clothed with intentionality. Reaching out to the enemy or to the offender with the intention to build a relationship, despite heart-wrenching memories, or with a view to peaceful co-existence is not true pardon. When the joy and peace of heart of forgiveness are absent, when the “heart, that is, passionate adherence, in other words, enthusiastic conviction and spontaneity, and the leap with joy”²⁵ is missing, then it is impure forgiveness that reigns. Jankelevitch presents three imprints of impure pardon: “patina of age”; “intellective apology”; and “liquidation”.

²² *Ivi*, p. 44.

²³ Renée De Tryon-Montalembert, Entretien avec le professeur Jankelevitch, “La vie spirituelle”, n. 619 (1977), p. 184.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 184.

²⁵ Vladimir Jankelevitch, *Le pardon*, Aubier Montaigne, Paris 1967, p. 47.

The first imprint has to do with time and its effects like oblivion, wear and tear, integration. Time *per se* has no power or right over pardon. Time can alleviate pain or sorrow, can help us forget; but time cannot make us forgive, nor can it transform us completely. How can anger or resentment transform into love by the simple passage of time? It is not time itself that brings about the transformation. Time as such is abstract, elusive. On the other hand, certain physical factors in time are responsible for transformation. It is the wind or the sea over the years that alters material or mineral things; it is not the years themselves. Obviously, Jankelevitch has the doctrine of prescription in mind. He asserts that the mere passage of time does not bring forgiveness or healing. Reflecting on his own life, he states that the passage of thirty-two years has not alleviated his anguish and suffering in the face of Nazi crimes; feelings are still vivid today as they did back then.

Neither the patina of age, forgetfulness, nor the integration that comes with time can justify pardon. The human who forgives in the name of temporality does not in truth pardon; he only gets accustomed to his pain, and sorrow. It is indifference, lassitude, *laissez-faire*, a kind of adaptation of the organism to its new state. Even if time swallows up all resentment, even when every event is integrated in our character, even when we have become familiar with pain, even if in the arms of time we learn to forget and continue living, such a pardon is “a double-edged sword”, with a double effect. It is directed towards death, and is an utter affront to the one forgiven:

Time fades all colours and dulls the brilliance of emotions; time mellows joy as it consoles sorrow; time numbs gratitude as it disarms grudge, the one and the other indiscriminately; it dries our tears, but it also extinguishes the flame of passion: love is lost in the sands of time; enthusiasm is doomed to ossification, mineralization, fossilization. ... Such times are of degradation rather than maturation ... a continuous death, a death diluted over the years, a series of little deaths before the big one, or in other words a ‘mortification’. Can forgiveness be preached in the name of death and decay?²⁶

The second imprint of impure pardon is the dangerous intellectual excuse on the altar of rationality. Just like time, this too is not pure. Although the intellectual excuse conforms to pardon and realizes almost the same result, it

²⁶ *Ivi*, p. 41.

differs from pure pardon in that it has different reasons, and various motives for forgiving. Pure pardon, or forgiveness of the heart is without motives; it reaches out to the one who does not deserve it. It is beyond reason, and reasoning. In fact, true pardon is irrational, pure folly.

To pardon in the name of intellection is a philosophical activity because it is a personal act that requires freewill, personal standpoint, and decision. It is the world of pardon's "because..." It is in some way opposite to time flowing by itself, detached from all activity on the part of the human. The intellectualist considers the act committed, the mechanism of intentions; he is aware of the seriousness of his act, accepts the guilt of the culprit, and denies the absolute wickedness inherent in human will. The intellectualist is an optimist who reaches out his hand to the transgressor and absolves him, because the latter was not responsible for his actions, but was the victim of a third party: Satan, or his emissary the serpent. The transgressor is innocent; he does not know what he is doing: "the guilty party is acquitted for the benefit of doubt"²⁷.

The intellectualive excuse is not a dramatic and instantaneous event. Intellection always happens over time and involves an incubation period. Understanding the fault calls for a well-reasoned analysis and reflection on the fault committed which an inherent process for deeper understanding, and the human inhabited by ambition or the desire to live in serenity with one's neighbour, hastens to make peace. In the intellectualive excuse there is no room for a personal relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. On the other hand, pardon of the heart finds its substance in the reality of the transgression, in perverse malice. It is an instantaneous, dazzling event; a free gift involving a personal relationship that enhances the value of the other.

The third and final imprint of impure pardon is instant liquidation. This is the realm of "good riddance". The offender acknowledges his offense spontaneously and appeals to the offended to liquidate the fault. The request is heard; the offended makes a lightning speed decision to let go of the offense, crosses out the fault, erases and liquidates everything, and acts as if nothing had happened. He does so because he wishes to get rid in one fell swoop the weight of his grudges and resentment, his vengeance, bitterness, and pain. He burns in haste his distressing memories, and he pardons.

²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 100.

What makes this sort of pardon impure, even though the offended person's decision to pardon looks like a gracious gift, is motivation. The diligence in burying the past and getting instantly rid of it is driven by the desire to live in peace, to get rid of the weight of painful memories:

to cast away, to let go, to give leave – this is the beginning of the great thaw. Alas! To let go, to cast away, to turn the page is not the way to build a relationship with someone; rather, it breaks all relations: the other, along with the painful worries and past nightmares, is thrown overboard. ... We dismiss from our thoughts his presence, and even his memory²⁸.

Even though instant liquidation resembles forgiveness (for gratuitousness and spontaneity, the two essential marks of pure pardon are nearly present here), it is a pantomime of pure pardon, a mimicry without intimacy or vibrancy. Jankelevitch compares pure forgiveness to a pyre and instant liquidation to a brazier. The pyre of pardon is cathartic and efficient when contained. On the other hand, in a brazier the fire smoulders in the embers, and the flame of anger or resentment can become a raging fire at any moment.

If these three imprints of impure pardon (pardon that comes in time, the pardon of intellectual excuse, the pardon of liquidation), is only a caricature of true forgiveness, where then is the heart of pardon?

Pure pardon: the eschatological confines of the irrational

Pure pardon, also called 'authentic', 'absolute', 'spontaneous', 'free', 'crazy', 'of the heart' pardon, is utopian, unattainable, an event that has never happened in the history of humankind. It is non-existent, because in all acts of forgiveness there is an infinitesimal intention. Even in sincere forgiveness there can be self-satisfaction and contentment after the act of forgiving, what Jankelevitch calls the "aftertaste". Pure pardon has no "foretaste", no "aftertaste". It has no infinitesimal reason; no altruistic ulterior motive to improve or convert the offended; no "atom of self-interest", or optimism on the part of the offended. Proselytism, philanthropic eschatology, a whiff of *spiritual concupiscence* makes pardon impure, because the offended expects something in return: a reward. Pure pardon has no motives. Its proper function

²⁸ Ivi, p. 135.

is to forgive the inexcusable, the incomprehensible, the unjustifiable. It is precisely when an act is inexcusable, incomprehensible, unjustifiable that pardon manifests itself. Pure pardon then “is the supreme recourse and the ultimate grace in despair; it is the one and only thing that remains to be done at the last instance. Here we reach the eschatological confines of the irrational”²⁹. Just like Paul’s famous hymn to Charity; or his reference to the folly of the Cross. Sheer gift.

Should we then conclude that pure pardon is beyond the reach of humans? Not so! In Jankelevitch’s eyes, even if, since the creation of the world, no one has ever forgiven without ulterior motives, without reservations, without aftertaste or foretaste, without mental restrictions, without a tiny dose of resentment, pure pardon remains our lofty aim. Even if it is an event that never happened, forgiveness is our duty in the sense of a capability. Pardon is a good, and if we have the will we can pardon. Thus, the will to forgive is the power to forgive:

it is sufficient that the possibility of pure forgiveness is conceivable; even if it is never actually attained, the limit of pure pardon would still point out our duty, would regulate and direct our efforts, would provide a criterion to enable us to distinguish between the pure and the impure, would give us a yardstick for evaluation and a meaning to charity...³⁰

The pure pardon of Jankelevitch is also a normative ideal. He describes it as the horizon of an infinite quest: “he who never reaches the ideal (the ideal being precisely never to be reached), can come as close as he can to the infinite... to reach as closely as possible”³¹. The folly of pardon is like the folly of faith in God which believes in spite of the absence of any convincing proof of God’s existence:

we are asked to believe in the indemonstrable only because it is, precisely, impossible to demonstrate: if religion were demonstrable, and if the proofs of Christianity were convincing, and if the existence of God was manifested, the folly of faith would be no more necessary than the folly of forgiveness³².

²⁹ *Ivi*, p. 139.

³⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 151-152.

³¹ *Ivi*, p. 152.

³² *Ivi*, pp. 139-140.

The grand banquet of crazy pardon is found in the parable of the prodigal son who is welcomed by his father:

Letting the father of the prodigal son welcome the repentant into his house, this is just and understandable. But to embrace him, dress him in his most beautiful robe, kill the fatted calf and give a feast in honour of the repentant, that is the inexplicable, the unjust, the mysterious grand banquet of pardon³³.

This inexplicable, unjust, mysterious grand banquet of pardon at the eschatological confines of the irrational manifests itself in all its gratuitousness as a sudden and spontaneous event, in a face-to-face relationship between the offender and the offended.

Just as impure pardon has three imprints, so has pure pardon. The first epiphany of pure pardon is inscribed in the fulgurant moment, in contrast to the first two marks of impure pardon: temporality and intellectual apology, both of which happens only with the passage of time and requires time to reason and absolve. True, the instantaneous character of pardon also requires time, that minimal delay between the offence and the pardon: time for the perpetuation of the offense, time for the offense to have found its mark. Pure pardon as an instantaneous event, not inscribed in time means to forgive infinitely in one go without delving or intellection, in an indeliberate movement, without any attempt to understand, without any clarification; to forgive once and for all, forever. An interesting example would be Jesus' exhortation to turn the right cheek when someone smites on the left³⁴. Jesus did not teach us to turn the other cheek after a period of rumination and incubation, nor after intellection and mature reflection, nor after multiple attempts to forget, but instantaneously. Jankelevitch writes: "He (Jesus) probably thought that temporalization and expectation would add nothing to the gratuitousness of pardon, and that forgiveness had resemblance with the spontaneity of a supernatural instinct"³⁵.

The second epiphany of pure pardon happens in the interpersonal relationship between the offender and the offended. This second imprint is antithetical to

³³ Luke 15,11-32; Vladimir Jankelevitch, *Le pardon*, Aubier Montaigne, Paris 1967, p. 201.

³⁴ Matthew 5,39; Luke 6,29.

³⁵ Vladimir Jankelevitch, *Le pardon*, Aubier Montaigne, Paris 1967, p. 49.

impure pardon's temporality and liquidation. Time, indifferent and solitary, does not wait for anyone nor is it concerned with anyone. Its blind eyes stare blankly at the future. In such an attitude, the amnesic offended is unable to begin an authentic relationship with the offender. In forgetting, the offended has broken all bonds with the other. In his enthusiastic decision to overcome the fault and to respond to the repentant offender, the offended erases hastily the fault and the wrongdoer 'as if' nothing had happened. By contrast, pure pardon is "an intention, and this intention is naturally directed towards the other. Since the *raison d'être* of pure pardon is to absolve, she addresses the sinner, directing her gaze towards the offender's eyes."³⁶ This imperative for a face-to-face relationship between the offender and offended, and an intimate heart to heart encounter, is the reason for the impossibility of collective pardon, and makes pardoning of crimes against humanity so much more unpardonable.

The third epiphany of pure pardon is experienced in the will of the offended to pardon the offender. This is a gift, freely given; a total remission of the fault or the offense, given without any aftertaste or foretaste, without any premeditation. It is an insane, excessive gift:

Pardon not only forgives infinitely more than the faults that the transgressor has committed, but it forgives in advance. That is pure pardon, forgives all fault that the offender could commit or will commit again. It immensely exceeds all guilt, present or future. Its resources are infinite; and infinite is its patience. Nothing discourages its inexhaustible generosity. It waits, without being repelled until the end of time. It would forgive seventy times seven if it had to. ... Pure pardon gifts the offender unlimited credit³⁷.

In this gratuitous gift are found two imprints of pure pardon: the unexpectedness in the act of pardon and the personal relationship of the offended with the offender. This gift of the heart, graciously gifted without

³⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 51-52.

³⁷ *Ivi*, p. 200.

There is something similar in Derrida's thought on unconditional forgiveness. In his interview with Michel Wieviorka, Derrida asks: "For there to be forgiveness, is it not necessary, on the contrary, to forgive both the fault and the culprit, where both remain, as irreversibly as the evil, as the evil itself, and would still be capable of repeating themselves, unforgivably, without transformation, without improvement, without repentance or promise?" Jacques Derrida, *Foi et savoir. Le siècle et le pardon. Entretien avec Michel Wieviorka*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 2000, p. 114.

the infinitesimal constraint breaks down the wall of remorse, releases the guilty from his punishment, sets him free, and lays the foundation for a new life. Pardon transforms the human, gives a new life: “it marks the rise of the ‘old man’ to a resurrected life, and it (pardon) is itself the celebration of this second birth”³⁸.

The pardoned offender is an altered being. Just as the experience of fault transformed him, so does the experience of pardon. It is also an irreversible experience. The experience of forgiveness is a return, but never a return to the departure point. Pardon cannot place the offender in the same place that the person occupied before the fault was committed. For insane pardon has placed its seal in the deepest part of his being and has transfigured him. Just like the prodigal son who finds himself at home after his wanderings:

The lost lamb who returns home, absolved, pardoned, repented, will never ever be the same as he was before he left: the adventure circuit is now completed, but an invisible differential element, an inalienable wealth distinguishes for always the prodigal son from the elder stay-at-home son. This I-do-not-know-quite-what differential, is the free surplus, that we call, from a word borrowed from the Gospels, the *perisson*³⁹.

Pardon implies a going beyond all legitimate and just instincts of the offended to pursue legally his offender. This refusal to have recourse to corrective justice, this renunciation of sanctions, makes pure pardon extra-legal, extrajudicial in our daily existence; an absurd, even irrational event.

But is such a pardon commensurable with the finite human?

In his interview with de Tyron-Montalembert, Jankelevitch admits that he is personally incapable of making this noble and sublime gift, which is of the same height as the sacrifice of one’s life. Such a pardon “implies a rupture, the surpassing of all instincts; personally, I feel incapable of it, because I am not a saint. For it is truly a form of holiness; at all events it is in the order of *grace*”⁴⁰.

³⁸ *Ivi*, p. 131.

³⁹ Reference to John 10,10. The word ‘*perisson*’ has the meaning of abundance. *Ivi*, p. 194.

⁴⁰ Renée De Tryon-Montalembert, *Entretien avec le professeur Jankelevitch*, “La vie spirituelle”, n. 619 (1977), p. 184.

The capacity to pardon the wicked, especially the inexplicable, uncalled-for wickedness that is beyond excuse or understanding, reveals the above and beyond of pardon, its power above and beyond evil. But such a pardon when and if it happens is rarely recognized. On the contrary, adds Jankelevitch, it is seen as a weakness on the part of the transgressed, and as an encouragement to continue doing evil.

The unceasing struggle between evil and pardon

Radical evil exists at the very level of intentions. Contrary to Socrates, for whom evil is committed out of ignorance, reminiscent of Latin *ignoscere* with its underlying reference to ignorance or forgetting, Jankelevitch is convinced that people know that they are doing evil, and continue to do so. The human tendency towards evil is due to the fact that between the two absolutes of the omnipotence of love and the irrationality of evil there is a rent, a breach that resists reparation or reconciliation. Humans are in perpetual oscillation between the infinity of pardon and the infinity of evil, between good and evil, with neither one stronger than the other. This eternal conflict between pardon and evil has a parallel in the Biblical Song of Solomon where love and death are seen as two equally strong opponents, engaged in a never yielding struggle⁴¹.

Nevertheless, in spite of this oscillation, the last word must not belong to evil, but to good, to pardon. This is because, as Paul Ricoeur, another French philosopher and colleague of Jankelevitch would write, though pardon remains an eschatological horizon, there is pardon: “*il y a, es gibt*, there is pardon”. The self has the capability to unbind oneself and the other by the act of pardoning, setting free both the offender and the offended. And however difficult this act is, the ‘yes’ of pardon, the ‘yes’ of good must be the end of everything⁴². From a religious point of view, we can rightly say that this is how pardon is stronger than evil, and that pardon is unsurpassable. But in our

⁴¹ Song of Solomon 8,6.

⁴² Ricoeur’s thought on pardon titled “Difficult Forgiveness” forms the epilogue of his book *Memory, history, forgetting*. Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, history, forgetting*, K. Blamey and D. Pellauer (trans), The University of Chicago press, London 2004.

On a side note, both these philosophers with their irreconcilable views on pardon – one who questioned vehemently the possibility of pardon (Jankelevitch), and the other who affirmed its possibility (Ricoeur) – lie just an alley apart, at Châtenay-Malabry new cemetery.

daily human existence and experience, evil goes beyond this horizon. It is always a tension, a continual effort, an inner struggle to forgive requiring tremendous moral striving (think of Sanskrit *sramah*); an unceasing effort to begin again, and again; to pardon not only the unpardonable crimes against humanity (which one does not often encounter in daily life), but also the day-to-day pinpricks of evil like slander, jealousy, envy, gossip, pettiness, minor irritations, infidelity, ingratitude... And we must strive even harder than the seventy times seven⁴³, strive until our last breath, until our very last sigh.

Paradoxically, in this very effort itself is the trace that pardon does not have the last word!

“At the evening of life, you will be examined in love”, wrote John of the Cross⁴⁴.

I add: At the evening of life, we will be examined in love, by Pure Pardon Himself.

⁴³ Matthew 18,22.

⁴⁴ John of the Cross, “Sayings of Light and Love”, n. 57.