

# Virtual Derrida\*

Sue Golding

We live at a time where words like »cyberspace« and the »internet«, »solid state« and »e-mail«, »virtual reality« and »spell-check«, actually make sense. Funnily enough, we live also at a time when words like »revolutionary« and »ethical«, »power« and »history«, »democratic« and »change«, »community« and the »political«, not to mention the very subject of our matter, that of »being« (human, perverse, time-worn or otherwise), seem rather at odds, a bit fuzzy, too hot to handle, or realized as something exactly other than what they are supposed to mean or imply.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as Derrida suggests, these oddly unfamiliar-familiar words seem to float rather aimlessly, though relentlessly, too, like some splintered wrecks from a ship that never existed but for a vague collective memory of some far away time, either too long ago past or not yet fully realized; that is to say, as Derrida would say, from the ghost worlds of a melancholic future or a mourningful past, writ large and encumbered, but ultimately, persistent and alive.

At the risk of implying too much by saying too little, I want to re-focus attention today on one of those fuzzy little words: namely, »necessity«. And I want to skewer this necessity along the virtual axes that Derrida paints with respect to promises, gifts, inheritances, ghosts, and the so-called »undeconstructibility« of the ethical demand as the just, unstoppable, manically democratic, demand.<sup>2</sup> Along the way, one and a half things (possibly two) may become clear: (1) we are dealing with a very peculiar notion of negation;

---

\*I would like to express my thanks especially to Ernesto Laclau, Professor and Chair, for organizing the conference on »Deconstruction and Politics« at the Centre for Theoretical Studies, Essex University, October 27-28, 1994, at which this paper was given.

<sup>1</sup> See for example Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1992) and its thorough discrediting by Derrida in »Spectres of Marx«, *New Left Review*, no. 205, May-June, especially pp. 41-50.

<sup>2</sup> I will be referring mainly to the abridged version of his longer work, *Spectres of Marx; The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf, forthcoming from Routledge in the autumn of 1994, and as earlier references as »Spectres of Marx«, *New Left Review*, pp. 31-58.

indeed (1.5) it is possibly not negation at all. Could it be said that Derrida has finally »taken a decision« by virtue of his courtship with the nether world of the undecidable and its spectral effects? Virtual Derrida: a quasi-negation, if ever there was one.

But here's the more interesting part for the deconstructive politicians amongst us: odd thought it may be, this virtual (Derridean) terrain, does indeed emit an ethical demand, though (point number two) it does so, in a way, quite a bit different than how Derrida himself claims it to be so.

### *The Three Laws of Necessity*

In order to re-state the contours and implications of »necessity«, in order to draw out what I would like to call the »three laws of necessity«, I would like to rumage around for a brief moment in Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, and notably, the first thesis. May I quote it, in part, as follows:

*I. The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism – that of Fukuyama – I mean Feuerbach included – is that the thing (Gegenstand), reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object (Objekt) or of contemplation (Anschauung), but not as human, sensuous activity, practice, [that is to say] not subjectively. Hence it happened that the active side, in contradistinction to materialism, was developed by idealism – but only abstractly... Hence in the Essence of Christianity, [Feuerbach] regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude, while practice is conceived and fixed only in its dirty-judaical form of appearance. Hence he does not grasp the significance of 'revolutionary,' i.e. of 'practical-critical,' activity.<sup>3</sup>*

Of the many significant aspects to this Thesis, the one that stands out as absolutely central – at least in this clipped version of it – is this: »real« change, »objective« change does not take place either by way of conspiracy (as in »the dirty« jewish international conspiracy model« of change) or for that matter, by divine retribution or intervention (as in »the God is on our side« model of change). Here change is specifically noted as a human endeavour and strategy, where »human«, »endeavour«, and »strategy« name, encompass, situate and produce an event *as event*, one which can never, *by necessity*, fall outside of history. The liberalist logic which accepts otherwise, that is to say, which accepts a self-contained, pre-configured »private« a-social human, replete with the Cartesian ego-I self-reflexive sense of individual self, one who *can*

<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, »Theses on Feuerbach«, in *Marx/Engels: Selected Works*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), p. 28.

»chose« whether to enter or not the social or the historical, is, for all intents and purposes, ditched.

First law of necessity, then: one does not select what the »is« is going to be. This does not mean that this »is« remains static, mute, or fully formed. Indeed, it implies precisely the reverse: Change is only and utterly the present-tense *expression* of »man-made« *strategies* (of power) that »stick«, that become a »must«, in the sense of meaning »real« or »permanent«, i.e. that become whatever the »is« is going to become, when whole masses of people (for example) shift. A systematic/systemic circumstantial shift, a »movement« that is not in and of itself wholly »intentional« or hundred per cent conscious, but a movement, nonetheless; one that contains and produces, indeed is grounded upon, a »vital materiality« of sorts – a »certain something« (which, Gramsci, names »the will«) – devoid of a pre-given archimedian point or an »outside« or abstract »thing-ness« which »secretly« moves »the us« along. I will return momentarily to this »certain something« and its supposed dimensionalities (around the outside or the in), not to mention what causes a »shift« in »the people«, especially if no outside force (like genius or God or his chosen people) can be called upon to take responsibility for movement as such. But let me just say that in unpacking the orthodoxy of Marx's first thesis, we find that here, in this first reading, »necessity«, indeed, »law«, is precisely the fluid, impossible-to-close fullness of the »to be«, whose very impurity, i.e., whose very unstatic-ness or instability or movement (i.e., change) has not one whit to do with definition. It is in this sense, and in this sense only, that one can never get »outside« of, or can never get to the »end« of, history, or, for that matter, fall off, say, the edge of the Earth.

We have here, then, a necessity that, albeit »imperfect«, »sensuous«, »impure«, »not-stagnant«, etc., forms a limit. A fluxed, heterogeneous, deep and abiding cut, which is itself discontinuous (though, nonetheless, in movement), infinitely »concrete«; a »telos« of sorts: now as co-extensive »ground«, now as circumscribing »edge«, now as middle-limit cut, etc. A limit around which, in between which, in spite of which, because of which – i.e. *out of necessity* – produces meaning »as such«, produces an »is«; a meaning which can only ever be »social«, »human«, »historical«. Without putting too fine a point on it, Marx called this impure [necessary] movement, the movement of »the 'real' dialectic.«

This first law of »necessity« (as imperfect, sensuous, mutated limit, we nonchalantly call »change«), implies and, in fact, secures, the second law of necessity; this being, of course the ethical demand of the »must be«. Or to put it slightly differently, the »must be« (as in the »past-is« and the »present-is«) always (also) calls forth the »must be« of the »that which might be possible«;

of, that is to say, the future »ought to be«, while at the same time not ignoring the fact that any »ought« [*devoir*] bears also an unavoidable imperative, demanding one »ought to act.« Here we find, then, that this second law of necessity is but the expression of a double bind: the double bind of »what is practically-possibly *able* to become (i.e., what is it that is not just mere fanciful daydream but that *can* [and therewith »must«] become, the »present-day real«, the »real future-is«), emeshed, simultaneously, in the unavoidable compulsion to act. Since the content of this [future] ethical demand could never be filled-in (how could it be: it hasn't yet happened), many marxists, neo-marxists, post-marxists and the like, have posed this double-conundrum of the future-must [ought (to be) as a kind of quasi-neo-Kantian-statement/question mark, in part asking how, in part demanding, that: »tasks become 'duty'; will becomes 'free'.«<sup>4</sup>

Now, before I bridge the gap between these remarks, encased as they are in the paradigm of an historical materialist (logocentric) dialectics, and, on the other hand, those of Derrida's, situated as they are in the domain of the promise, the debt, and various spectral effects which may (or may not) produce the desired emancipatory possibilities, two more points need to be clarified.

First, what is of interest here, in reviewing this second law (the double bind) of »necessity«, is to recognize the degree to which the political (as both practical-political and ethical-political) enters into the arena of necessity by way of, as confusing as this might sound, the first law of necessity. To my mind, at any rate, this is precisely what »hegemony« is all about: the *strategic* »art of the possible«, a purposeful making of a »future-is«, a »future-must/ought-to-be« that can »stik«; one which trawls, at the very same time, the »past-is«/»present-is« and, therewith, in this multiple singularity of necessity, sets up the limit, in all its nefarious limitation (edge, centre, ground, horizon and so forth and so on); i.e., a limit, let us not forget, which is ever only an impossible closure (though meaningful/»closed«, nonetheless).

<sup>4</sup> Derrida, in referencing Kojève's »post-historical man« makes a similar point: »'Post-historical man *doit* ...,« writes Kojève. »*Doit*« what? Is »*doit*« to be translated here as »must« or »should«? *Whatever may be the case concerning the modality or the content of this »devoir*«, whatever may be the necessity of this prescription, even if it calls for eternities of interpretation, there is an »it is necessary« for the future. Whatever may be its indetermination, be it that of »it is necessary [that there be] the future« [*il faut l'avenir*], there is some future and history, there is perhaps even the beginning of historicity for post-historical Man, beyond man and beyond history such as they have been represented up to now. We must insist on this specific point precisely because it points to an essential lack of specificity, an indetermination that remains the ultimate mark of the future: *whatever may be the case concerning the modality or the content of this duty, this necessity, this prescription of this injunction, this pledge, this task, also therefore this promise, this necessary promise, this »it is necessary« is necessary and that is the law.*« (»Spectres of Marx«, p. 51).

Second point, then: that this hegemonic (practical-political + ethical-political) limit is not, as noted earlier (though in a slightly different context), »hundred per cent conscious«. Indeed, not only is it not hundred per cent conscious or intentional – and thus cannot be confined to the level of a political party (quite obviously) – but the geography that a hegemonic moment produces or works from, in order to produce »the new« as necessary, relies also upon (by incorporating, producing, creating, maintaining, etc.) an excess, whatever the content of that excess may be. For as we know, in order that an identity produce itself as such; in order for an identity to »stick«; it must somehow »go beyond« the tautology of an  $a = a$ ; it must somehow »go beyond« the mimetic mirroring of its reflection. A remainder, a not-of-the-something must exist as remainder, as excess, as, that is to say, a »not-the-same«. In this sense, then, we come to, through a somewhat circuitous route, the third law of necessity: the »must be« of a limit is always a virtual, almost (i.e., not quite the same; »fictioned«) to be. What is of interest here is not only that this notion of excess is precisely political in all its impossible imaginings; but that it no longer presupposes a binaric divide. We have a »virtual« limit as limit, one which is neither inside nor outside; neither beginning nor ending, »history«. One that is precisely steeped, instead, in the politics of the neither/nor, in the politics of the limit, of necessity, as itself, »virtual reality«.

### *Mourning and Melancholia: Promises, Promises*

Virtual reality admits no general History of history to the limitation of its being-there; rather it admits only to the specificities of the (small »p«) politics, in all its nuanced sedimentations, corruptions and hegemonic displays. But when Derrida speaks of a virtual limit, he replaces the politics of the virtual being-there with »the logic of the ghost,« a spectre whose affirmation »is now the realization; now the heralding of the realization«.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, he breaks with logic of binaries, and continues what he began so long ago in *Of Grammatology*, and elsewhere: to radicalize, as he puts it, – while carrying on (indeed, inheriting) – a »certain spirit of Marxism«.<sup>6</sup>

»If we have been insisting so much since the beginning on the logic of the ghost«, says Derrida, »it is because it points toward a thinking of the event that necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic, the logic that distinguishes or opposes effectivity or actuality (either present, empirical, living – or not) and ideality (regulating or absolute non-presence). (...) This logic of the limit, to be sure, is not new; it has always been leaving its mark on anti-marxist

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

*idealism as well as on »'dialectical materialism'. But ... [i]t is also made more manifest by what inscribes the speed of a virtuality irreducible to the opposition of the act and the potential of the space of the event, in the event-ness of the event.«<sup>7</sup>*

With the logic of the ghost (and its attendant spectral effects in the form of inheritance and debt and promise), we have at once the memory of a past that was never quite »there«, i.e., a haunting memory of an event, a mourningful death of an emancipatory past that was never quite all that it »ought« to be. At the same time, we are the inheritors of this dead body, this dead marxism, in all its varying dimensions (»there are many marxisms,« Derrida solemnly intones, and we've inherited them all); so we encumbered with the carrying on or carrying out of a debt. And what is this debt, but precisely the »spirit«, the ghostly ghost of marxism; to wit, its affirmative thinking and emancipatory promise »as promise and not as ontolo-theoretical or teleo-eschatological programme or design«. It means, accordingly, advancing a political agenda where »one must not renounce the emancipatory desire; [but rather] ... insist on it more than ever, it seems, and insist on it, moreover, as the very indestructibility of the 'it is necessary'.«<sup>8</sup> A plaintive, »messianic call without the messianism,« says Derrida.

But here is where things get a bit worrying. For while it makes perfect sense to get rid of a teleological unfolding and onto-theological ground, and, furthermore, while it is with the best of intentions that Derrida calls out for an irreligious messianic moment that takes as a given »the ideal of democracy« and thus has an eye to »creating a new Enlightenment for the century to come,«<sup>9</sup> it seems that we might be left with a rather strange concept of necessity/limit, one where the must/»ought to be« seems rather closer to the Nike running shoe commercial of »Just Do It«, than to the spirit of Marx's self-critique and the »revolutionary«/»practical-critical activity« this would, of necessity, provide. A headless messianic order, a radical mastery of the law, to be sure, but one, it would seem divorced from the very life blood, the very sensuousness of life itself.

It seems that neither we (not Derrida, with all due respect) need go down that particular part of the Promised Land. For it we link the concept of hegemony (and the ethico-political necessity this implies and secures), with that of the spectral in all its virtual realisms, necessities, imaginings, limits, and decay, there is the possibility not only to interpret change – and to pay homage to it – but to make it »stick«.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45–6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.