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MOTHERS IN MOURNING

with the essay

Of Amnesty and Its Opposite

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Of Amnesty and Its Opposite

Under the heading "Uses of Oblivion," I would like to talk about amnesty.

But already the step has been taken that, from a purged memory, ends in oblivion. So strongly does the sequence impose itself—amnesty, amnesia—seductive like an etymology, evident like an assonance, necessary it seems (or so we think, at any rate, when we mistrust both oblivion and amnesty on principle). Oblivion, however, could come too quickly or be excessive, when by oblivion we mean the shadow cast by the political on memory. Can we truly see something like a strategy of oblivion in amnesty, the institutional obliteration of those chapters of civic history that the city fears time itself is powerless to transform into past events? It would be necessary for us to be able to forget on command. But in itself, this utterance has little meaning.

There are other ambivalences, too. If oblivion is not an irremediable absence, but, as in the Freudian hypothesis, a presence absent only from itself, a veiled surface sheltering what would only have been repressed, then the aim of amnesty would definitely be paradoxical. Moreover, to take the word literally, what does an amnesty want, what is its proclaimed intention? An erasing from which there is no coming back and no trace? The crudely healed scar of an amputation

hence forever memorable, provided that its object be irremediably lost? Or the planning of a time for mourning and the (re)construction of history?

We must arrive at some answer, but I shall abstain from providing any for now and suggest a detour, a way of taking a step back. What about amnesty as it was considered in ancient times, when what we call by that name did not have a name (although the word *amnēstia* was available to this end) but was an utterance that was syntactically doubly restraining? We might as well say that the detour will be Greek, more precisely Athenian, and that the double utterance adjoins a prescription (*ban on recalling misfortunes*) to the taking of an oath (*I shall not recall misfortunes*).

Ban on recalling, I shall not recall. Twice, it is a question of memory in Athens. A rejected memory, but still a memory. Shall we lose sight of oblivion? This is the detour for now. Just long enough to put into perspective what we mean by this word, and better to build up the Greek notion: more threatening, more archaic, and as if original insofar as it hides in the shelter of its opposite, this notion will appear only under negation (but in a very different manner than memory does in Athens). This guarantees a slow decoding at the heart of banned utterances, utterances that are hidden under the reference to memory by a very Greek procedure.

A ban, what is banned. Evidently, the dissonance between the two categories is essential, and it would be better not to be reductive about it.

Two Bans on Memory in Athens

Two bans on recalling in Athens of the fifth century B.C. One at the very beginning of the century, and the other at the very end.

Herodotus makes himself the historian of the first one. Recounting the Ionian revolt in 494, and how the Persians subdued the rebels by capturing Miletus, which they then emptied of people and whose sanctuaries they burned, Herodotus lingers on the reaction to this

event of two different peoples of the Ionian family. Formerly deprived of their fatherland—over which event the Milesians had mourned considerably, as befits parents or guests—the inhabitants of Sybaris did not repay the Milesians in kind. On the other hand, the Athenians showed an extreme, not to say excessive, affliction. And more specifically, it happened that

Phrynichus, having produced a play, the *Capture of Miletus*, the whole theater broke into tears, and he was fined a thousand drachmae for having reminded them of their own misfortunes (*hōs anamnēsanta oikēia kaká*), and they ordered that no one (*mēkēti mēdēna*) should ever make use of this play.

(Herodotus 6.21)

Doubtless, with this very official decree of the Assembly of the people, the Athenians thought they were only forbidding any future representation of the *Capture of Miletus*, sinking Phrynichus's tragedy irresistibly into oblivion. But we will readily ascribe an entirely different significance to this decision, eminently paradigmatic of the Athenian status of civic memory, and the Athenian definition of the tragic. Heavily fined and banned from the stage for having introduced in Athenian theater an action (*drāma*) that is nothing but suffering (*páthos*)¹ for the Athenians, and a family matter—the Ionian family, this family that is also the city, that is in one word the civic identity, this collective self that defines itself by the sphere of what is one's own (*oikeion*)²—by making them recall "their own misfortunes," the first of the great tragedians awakens his fellow citizens—for what I like to consider the first time—to the dangers of recalling, when the object of memory is a source of mourning for the civic self.

¹ I take *páthos* 'suffering' from the form *pathōsi* describing the Milesians (Herodotus 6.21).

² On Herodotus's account, see S. Mazzarino's remarks (who translates *oikēia* as "own" in *Il pensiero storico classico*, 2d ed. [Bari, 1983], I: 107–8). On *oikeios*, see N. Loraux, "Oikeios polemos: La guerra nella famiglia," *Studi storici* 28 (1987): 5–35, as well as "La main d'Antigone," *Mètis* I (1986): 165–96.

A long history begins, that of the Athenian practice of memory, and that, also, of tragedy, which we imagine forever marked by this initial check. The Athenian people make it known that they will not bear to see anything on stage that affects them painfully; the tragedians learn the lesson and know how to avoid too current events, unless those events are a source of mourning for others, a mourning tirelessly transformed in a hymn to Athens's glory, as in the *Persians*.³ A choice as important as that of fiction⁴—or, let us say, *múthos*—for the tragic genre may perhaps be ascribed to this mandatory departure from current events. At any rate, we should observe that when the *múthos* takes place in Athens, the tragedy will characteristically be endowed, as in Euripides' Athenian plays, with a "positive" ending; consequently the "real" tragedies, in which the *drama* is at the same time *páthos*, will take place outside of the city. In the fourth century, Isocrates delights in formulating the law that requires that Athens represent in its own theater crimes originally attached to "other cities."⁵

Thus, at the beginning of the fifth century, Athens commits itself to a well-monitored practice of civic memory.

The second ban, at the very end of the century, aims at preventing any recall of the "misfortunes" that have befallen the very self of the city, torn at its core by civil war. After the military defeat of Athens and the bloody oligarchy of the Thirty, this is the ban on "recalling the misfortunes" that seals the democratic reconciliation in 403. We call this

³ Aeschylus *Persians* 284–85, 287, 824 (as well as Herodotus 5.105). With S. Mazarino (*Il pensiero storico classico*, 1:107–8), we should note that the Darius of the *Persians* evidently does not recall the victory he won at Ephesus over the Athenians and Ionians.

⁴ This is J.-P. Vernant's reading in "Le sujet tragique: Historicité et transhistoricité," in J.-P. Vernant and P. Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie* (Paris, 1986), 2: 86–87.

⁵ Isocrates *Panathenaicus* 121–23. Athenian tragedies: even taking ambiguity into account, this is the case in Euripides (*Ion*, *Suppliant Women*, *Heracleidae*) as well as in Aeschylus's *Eumenides*. As Renate Schlesier brings to my notice, it is undeniable that Athens itself can nevertheless be brought into question; but it is always in an indirect manner, for example, through the opposition Greeks/barbarians in the tragedies of Euripides' Trojan cycle.

an amnesty—modern historians of Greece even make this episode the model amnesty, the paradigm of all those that occidental history will come to know, and already Plutarch uses this term when, conscious of the deep affinity between the two gestures, he associates the "decree of amnesty" (*tò pséphisma tò tēs amnēstias*) with the fine imposed on Phrynichus.⁶

The year 403 before our era: hunted down only the day before, having now come back victorious to Athens, the democrats proclaim a general reconciliation with a decree and an oath. The decree proclaims the ban: *mē mnēsikakeîn*, "It is forbidden to recall the misfortunes"; the oath binds all the Athenians, democrats, oligarchs, important people, and "quiet" people who stayed in the city during the dictatorship, but it binds them one by one: *ou mnēsikakēsō*, "I shall not recall the misfortunes."

Recall the misfortunes, what does this phrase mean—which the compound verb *mnēsikakeîn* expresses formulaically in Athens and in other cities? Once we accept that, under the designation *kaká* 'misfortunes', the Greeks mean what we would more readily call, in a euphemistic mode, events—the disorder in the city—we should pay attention to *mnēsi-*, a form developed from the Greek root for "memory." To judge by the uses of *mnēsikakeîn*, it is less a matter of bringing back to memory, as when Phrynichus provoked an *anamnēsis* (*anamnēsanta*) among the Athenians, than of recalling *against*. Since *anamnēsis* acts upon the citizens of Athens, the verb requires a double object in the accusative—the content of the recollection, and the subject who is reminded; on the other hand, governing in many contexts a dative of hostility, *mnēsikakeîn* suggests that one brandishes a memory in an offensive manner, that one attacks, or that one punishes someone else; in short, that one seeks revenge. Thus, originally neutral, as it was (we suppose) before Phrynichus, the recall of misfortunes becomes a vindictive act at the beginning of the fourth century.

⁶ *Precepts of Statecraft* 814b–c. We should note that this text, devoted to what it is necessary to recall from the past in order to offer it to the imagination, explicitly retains as objects of memory only acts resulting in oblivion.

Mnēsikakeîn: in Plato, the word is used of the victorious party that retaliates with banishing and killing.⁷ In Athens after 403, it more specifically designates, in Aristotle as well as in judicial speeches, the act—which is at the same time considered both explicable and illegitimate, and the responsibility for which is regularly that of the democrats—of starting proceedings for acts of civil war.⁸

Mê mnēsikakeîn: this is a way of proclaiming that there is a time limit for seditious acts. The aim is to restore a continuity that nothing breaks, as if nothing had happened. The continuity of the city, symbolized by the *aei* (always: that is to say, each time) of the rotation of duties that is untouched by the conflict between democracy and oligarchy: the magistrate Rhinon, for example, who enters office under the oligarchy and who gives an account of his services in front of the democratic assembly without the least difficulty, is a symbol of this continuity.⁹ We also know that the clause excluding the Thirty from the amnesty was voided for those of them who thought themselves faultless enough to be exposed to the people's eyes. But, at the same time and without worrying about contradiction, there is also the continuity of the democracy of the fifth century with the democracy established after the reconciliation, a continuity certainly more difficult to imagine, short of treating the open wound of the dictatorship as a parenthesis; it was enough, then, to purge this oligarchic parenthesis, if not of the "tyranny" (carefully maintained, on the contrary, as an anomaly, acting as a foil for all rhetorical indignation), then at least of the civil war in its reality. Whether the operation was useful is another matter: to judge by all the things that set the "restored," though toned-down, democracy after 403 against the democracy ending in 405, one could wager that no operation of mem-

⁷ Letter VII, 336e–337a; I follow Luc Brisson's translation (Plato, *Lettres* [Paris, 1987]), who explains the construction of the sentence by grouping *kratēsantes mákhais*.

⁸ See, for example, Aristotle *Athenian Constitution* 40.2; Isocrates *Against Callimachus* 23 (and 2, where *dikázesthai parà toùs hórkous* is the strict equivalent of *mnēsikakeîn*); Lysias *Against Nicomachus* 9; and Andocides *On the Mysteries* 104. Illegitimacy: the act of inadmissibility evoked in *Against Callimachus* 2 attempts to prevent the very existence of such trials, and as Yan Thomas brings to my attention, as with the current prejudicial question, it locks the entire Athenian system against memory.

⁹ Aristotle *Athenian Constitution* 38.4.

ory was successful in closing the wound, so deep was the gash made in the city by the conflict.

It is precisely this conflict (of division) that should be expurgated from the history of Athens, in every recollection of the past, by "letting go of events that came before." They subtract them, or rather—this is less obvious—they erase, and it is from this erasing, repeated every time, that they anticipate the benefits of forgetfulness.¹⁰

Further explanation is needed here: in speaking of erasing, I do not mean to turn to a worn metaphor dear to our modern idiom; I mean to speak Greek, in this case Athenian. In Greek discourse about writing as the preferred tool of politics, the act of erasing (*exaleiphein*) is first a gesture at the same time institutional and very material. Nothing is more official than an erasing; they erase a name from a list (the Thirty hardly had any hesitations), they erase a decree, a law henceforth obsolete (to ban the deeds of the *stásis* from memory, the restored democracy more than once made use of this practice): thus subtraction responds to subtraction. But we should also note that, up to this point, there is nothing in the erasing but the very concrete. To erase is to destroy by additional covering: they coat the surface of a whitewashed official tablet anew, and, once the lines condemned to disappear are covered up, there is a space ready for a new text; similarly, they insert a correction with paint and brush on an inscribed stone, hiding the old letter with a new one. Erasing? Nothing but banal, run-of-the-mill political life. It is not that, here and there, *exaleiphein* is not metaphorical. Then the image of an inner writing appears, drawn in memory or in the mind, and thus susceptible, like all inscriptions, to erasing, whether this erasing is beneficial, when thought, as it develops, gets rid of mistaken beliefs, or whether it is harmful, when it is a matter of doing without mourning. The reconciliation of 403 is distinctive in that political memory is expressed in a register at the same time symbolical and material—not only one, not only the other, and both simultaneously. Erasing plays a double game

¹⁰ Andocides *On the Mysteries* 81. Some democratic orators actually speak of forgetfulness, but as of a mistake: see Lysias *Against Eratosthenes* 85 ("They think you are quite forgetful"); see also *Against a Charge of Subverting the Democracy* 2.

then: some decrees are actually erased, but when Aristotle claims that the Athenians behaved well by “erasing the charges (*tās aítias* ‘the reasons [for a trial]’) bearing on the earlier period,” this erasing, entirely preventive, has no other goal than to ban *mnēsikakeîn*, no other aim than to avoid trials to come, no other effect than that of a speech act, like an oath. Thus it appears that the Athenians set up a close relation of equivalence between a prohibition of memory and erasing.¹¹

Let us take one further step forward: few sources verify that there were, on the other hand, democrats who wished to erase—symbolically and perhaps institutionally—the agreements between citizens from both sides, because democrats who dared express themselves in this way were rare.¹² But there were some to be sure who wished “to recall the misfortunes,” or more precisely—on this point, Aristotle is explicit—there was at least one, among those who came “back,” who started to *mnēsikakeîn*; so the moderate Archinos, having also come back to Athens with the *dēmos* and having thus taken on an aura of prestige, drags this man before the Council and has him put to death without judgment. Whether the story of this unknown democrat, doomed to anonymity because he demonstrated an untimely taste for memory, is historic or serves as an *aition* for the law of the same Archinos regulating the modalities of the charge after 403, the lesson is clear: the moderate politician is an example (*parádeigma*), and once this promoter of memory was put to death, “no one afterwards recalled the misfortunes.”¹³ An expiatory victim has been sacrificed to memory; henceforth a fine will be enough to dissuade.

If at least one execution was necessary, it is because, underlying the whole process, there was much at stake for politics: it was a matter of reestablishing the exchange—the Athenians spoke of “the reconcilia-

¹¹ Mistaken beliefs: Plato *Theaetetus* 187b; doing without mourning: Euripides *Hecuba* 590; decrees actually erased: Andocides *On the Mysteries* 76; erasing the charges: Aristotle *Athenian Constitution* 40.3. For the association of the two gestures—prohibition of memory and erasing—see Andocides *On the Mysteries* 79.

¹² Only Isocrates *Against Callimachus* 26: “You were angry at those who said that it was necessary to erase (*exalephein*) the agreements.”

¹³ See Isocrates *Against Callimachus* 2–3. *Aition*: the unfortunate democrat probably “was the first (*érxato*)” to *mnēsikakeîn*, rather than “began to” (G. Mathieu, *Discours* [Paris, 1962]). “No one afterwards”: Aristotle *Athenian Constitution* 40.2.

tion” (*diállagē*) or “the concord” (*homónoia*)—between citizens who, a few months beforehand, confronted each other, army against army. To this end, it mattered to exonerate those who did not conquer, to isolate the guilty: the Thirty, of course, who, as a matter of fact, already occupied this position; designated numerically, just as often the colleges of magistrates in Greece, they are all the more easy to count then, they who are also manifestly promoters of the conflict. One clause of the agreement—modified, we saw, with a restriction that is not negligible—made an exception to the ban on *mnēsikakeîn* for them alone.¹⁴ The responsibility for the bloodshed thus fixed, all the other Athenians are left, destined to become reconciled. Thus they would not have to consider the notion of a henchman (informers in the service of the tyrants are exonerated, if they did not kill with their own hand, and everything goes on as if no one had done it) and could stick with the notion, a reassuring one, of “quiet” citizens. And during the trials there are actually scores of *kósmioi*, supporters of order, who have nothing to blame themselves for. . . . At the conclusion of the process, the city will be reconstituted, one and indivisible from the official praises of Athens.

I spoke of political stakes. Were I an Aristotelian, I would have to say that politics itself was at stake. Witness Aristotle himself concerning Archinos: “He acted as a good politician” (*politeúsasthai kalós*); and concerning Athenian democrats: “They seem to have used their past misfortunes in the most beautiful and most civic manner (*kállista kai politikótata*).” But already Isocrates gave the real story: “Since we mutually gave each other pledges . . . , we govern ourselves in a manner as beautiful as collective (*hoútō kalós kai koinōs politeuómetha*) as if no misfortune had happened to us.”¹⁵ Everything is clear: politics is to act as if everything were fine. As if nothing had happened. Neither conflict nor murder nor ill-feelings (nor resentment).

¹⁴ Some other oligarchic bodies are to be added: see Aristotle *Athenian Constitution* 39.6 and Andocides *On the Mysteries* 90. On the use that citizens accused of antidemocratic intrigues make of it, see Lysias 25.5, 16, 18.

¹⁵ Aristotle *Athenian Constitution* 40.2 and 3 (where we note that the Athenians “use” their misfortunes just as, in Herodotus, they forbid anyone to “use” Phrynichus’s tragedy); Isocrates *Against Callimachus* 46.

Of politics, then, which would start where vengeance stops. Thus, in the tradition of Isocrates and Aristotle, Plutarch will praise Poseidon, once pretender to the title of master of Athens, but defeated by Athena, for his lack of resentment (*aménitos*); that is to say, the god was "more political" (*politikóteros*) than Thrasybulus, leader of the democrats who returned to the city and as a result of his victory enjoyed an easy generosity. And the same Plutarch adds that the Athenians recorded this divine clemency doubly: by subtracting the anniversary of the conflict, a grievous memory for the god, from the calendar, and by raising an altar to Lethe, Oblivion, in the Erechtheion.¹⁶ A negative operation—the subtraction—and the establishing of oblivion on the Acropolis (the very place the Athenians like to call the City), in the depths of the temple of Athena Polias: erasing of the conflict, promotion of *léthē* as the basis of life in the city. And Plutarch also gives this as a definition of the political (*politikón*): that it deprives—this is perhaps the fundamental subtraction—hate of its eternal character (*tò aidion*).¹⁷

These are Athenian matters, to be sure. But how to keep them at a distance up till the end? I have resisted the demon of analogy, who, more than once, whispered to me, not inappropriately, such and such a parallel with France of the Liberation, and the debates that took place from 1945 to 1953 about the legitimacy of the purge, or a comparison with the repressing and forgetting of these events we would like to be certain are actually behind us, since they took place in the France of Vichy.¹⁸ But I cannot refrain, by way of a quasi-contemporary counterpoint, from quoting this conversation of 24 July 1902, reported by Jules Isaac:

Péguy tells me that tolerance leads to degradation, that it is necessary to hate. I asked him: "But what is hate?" "Nonamnesty."¹⁹

¹⁶ Plutarch *Table Talk* 9.6 (in *Moralia* 741b); *On Brotherly Love* 18 (*Moralia* 489b-c).

¹⁷ Plutarch *Solon* 21.2.

¹⁸ See H. Rousso, "Vichy, le grand fossé," *Vingtième siècle* 5 (1985): 55-79, as well as *Le syndrome de Vichy, 1944-198 . . .*, (Paris, 1987).

¹⁹ "Péguy me dit que la tolérance conduit à l'aviissement, qu'il faut haïr. Je lui ai demandé: "Mais qu'est-ce que la haine?—La non-amnistie," (J. Isaac, *Expériences de*

In 1900, the Dreyfus affair had experienced its first turning point with the vote of amnesty, but in his anger,²⁰ Péguy was among those who did not want the matter to be closed, because there was no matter to begin with. And it must be added that Péguy, certainly not very "political" in the Greek sense (the lasting sense?) of the word, broke with Jaurès in 1902.

I close the parenthesis but ask the question that comes up again and again, like the most forbidden of temptations: what if the word "political" had more than one meaning? Or, more exactly, appealing to the distinction between politics and the political: could there be a Greek politics that did not base itself on oblivion? Does this politics, which would take into account the inevitability of the conflict, which would allow that the city is by definition doomed to divide itself into two, and not between "tyrants" on one side and Athenians on the other, does this politics, which is at the same time inimical and communal, have any other existence than as a construction of the imagination?²¹ It so happens that if the construction is indeed a Greek one, the inimical community seems to have been thus constructed only as the fiction of an origin always already outmoded: in the beginning was the conflict; then came the *pólis* . . . And, endlessly, amnesty would then reinstitute the city against recent misfortunes. Or rather, against the original *máthos*.

Clearly there is no way out. It is better to take things back toward oblivion and what, in Greece, makes the stakes so high.

To Forget Nonoblivion

Let us decode the strategy of Athenian memory, concentrating on some aspects that are homologous to more generally Greek models. From here on, the discussion is openly about oblivion.

ma vie, vol. 1, Péguy [Paris, 1963], 282). On the "contemporaneity" of the Dreyfus affair, see M. Winock, "Les affaires Dreyfus," *Vingtième siècle* 5 (1985): 19-37.

²⁰ See J.-M. Rey, *Colère de Péguy* (Paris, 1987).

²¹ See N. Loraux, "Le lien de la division," *Le cahier du Collège international de philosophie* 4 (1987): 102-24.

We begin with the epilogue of the *Odyssey*. At the news of the suitors' murder, there is a great deal of emotion in the city of Ithaca. People gather in the agora, with heavy hearts. Eupheithes, father of Antinoos, who was Odysseus's first target, speaks: *álaston pénthos*, mourning that cannot be forgotten (mourning that does not want to forget), holds him, and he calls for revenge on the murderers. A wise speech is given in response by a wise man, who pleads for the rights of the present. Deaf to the arguments of Eupheithes the "Persuasive," the majority side with this (good) viewpoint; the rest of the people run to their weapons. Against the backdrop of this urgent situation, a dialogue between Zeus and Athena takes place: let the people of Ithaca exchange oaths, and the gods will create oblivion (*éklēsin théōmen*) of the murder.²² Peace will come back. For now, the fighting begins: Eupheithes falls, as do others still in his company. Then Athena restrains Odysseus's arm (saying to her favorite: "Put an end to the conflict of a too even-sided war"). Solemn oaths are exchanged. End of the *Odyssey*.

As if in echoing response, we have the wish of the politically committed poet Alcaeus, the first to pronounce in his verses the word *stásis*:

May we forget this anger (*ek dè khólō tōde lathōmetha*).

Let us free ourselves from the heart-eating rebellion and civil war,
which one of the Olympians has aroused.

(Alcaeus frag. 70 Campbell)

Eklēthomai in Alcaeus, *éklēsis* in the *Odyssey*: everything starts with a call to oblivion. To forget not only the bad deeds of others but one's own anger so that the bond of life in the city may be renewed. Hence the question: are we to suppose that something like a story intervenes between the archaic wish for oblivion and the Athenian ban on memory? What could have happened between the oblivion that was spoken for and the prescription not to recall? Since once again we must try to construct from history, I suggest that between oblivion of wrath

²² *Odyssey* 24.485.

and the recall of misfortunes we place the poetic notion of "oblivion of ills."

This oblivion of the painful present, which the poet's song celebrating the glory of past men brings, would then be positive when it is conferred by the Muses, daughters of Memory—themselves, however, defined as *lēsmosúnē kakōn* 'oblivion of ills'. The oblivion of a very recent bereavement, even if it is imputed to the instantaneous power of the inspired word, has to be free from all ambiguity.²³ Already in Homer, at any rate, there is doubt about this "beneficial" oblivion, when Helen has recourse to a drug and a story to tear Telemachus and Menelaus away from Odysseus's *álaston pénthos* in book 4 of the *Odyssey*. Antidote to bereavement and wrath, *nēpenthes*, *ákholon*, *kakōn epilēthon hapantōn*, the drug dispenses oblivion of all ills. And what ills!

And whoever drank it when it had been mixed in the wine bowl,
for that day he would let no tears down his cheeks,
not if his mother or father died,
and not if someone killed his brother or his own son in
front of him with the bronze, and he saw it with his own eyes.

(*Odyssey* 4.222–26)

To weep over father and mother is a duty that allows no exception, and the obligation of avenging the murder of a son or brother is particularly strong.²⁴ As immediate as its effect is temporary, the drug can indeed substitute for mourning the "charm"—itself eminently ambiguous—"of the tale"²⁵ and the pleasures of the feast, though for a

²³ Positive oblivion: M. Detienne, *Les maîtres de vérité dans la Grèce archaïque* (Paris, 1967), 69–70; oblivion of ills: Hesiod *Theogony* 55; recent bereavement: *Theogony* 98–103.

²⁴ See especially *Iliad* 9.632–33 (criticizing Achilles, who is walled in by his refusal, Ajax claims that one must accept compensation even from the murderer of a brother or a son, which is a way of suggesting that the desire for vengeance is never as strong as it is in this case), as well as *Odyssey* 24.433–435 (Eupheithes' speech).

²⁵ This is the title of the study by R. Dupont-Roc and A. Le Boulluc: "Le charme du récit (*Odyssee*, IV, 218–289)," in *Écritures et théorie poétiques: Lectures d'Homère, Eschyle, Platon, Aristote* (Paris, 1976); see also A. Bergren, "Helen's Good Drug"

time it nonetheless cuts the one who drinks it off from society. Such is the ultimate extreme of oblivion of ills, this *phármakon*—a cure for pain, but a poison for human existence, insofar as it is eminently contractual.

The difference between the durable political ban on pursuing a vengeance that would be hurtful to the community and the charm that dispels mourning every time, though only temporarily, is obvious. By swearing not to recall previous misfortunes, the Athenian citizen affirms that he forgoes vengeance, and, to put himself under the double authority of the city, which issues decrees, and of the gods, who punish, he also asserts the control he will maintain over himself as subject; conversely, sweet oblivion comes from elsewhere, be it a gift of the Muses or of the poet, an effect of Helen's drug or of wine (in many contexts) or of the sheltering motherly breast (in book 22 of the *Iliad*); if it is presented with insistence as the oblivion of what cannot be forgotten, no approval, no consent is required from the one it befalls, who, momentarily subjected to this bracketing of misfortunes, is perhaps deprived of everything that made up his identity.

Because, not to give to oblivion all of its power, what is translated passively as "unforgettable" is also—I propose—what we should call the *unforgetful*:²⁶ the very thing, in Greek poetics, that does not forget and that inhabits the mourner so that it says "I" in the mourner's voice. This is what must be voided through recourse to the drug of "oblivion of ills"; this is, perhaps, what the Athenians prefer to avert in their own name by a decree and an oath. Despite the obvious parallel between formulas, no word-for-word transposition can transform the political ban on memory into a direct avatar of *léthē kakôn*. Still it is

in S. Kresic, ed., *Contemporary Literary Hermeneutics and Interpretation of Classical Texts* (Ottawa, 1981), 200–214.

²⁶ The "unforgetful" has much in common with the "inflexible thing" ("la chose intraitable") that J.-F. Lyotard considers in "A l'insu," in "Politiques de l'oubli," *Le genre humain* 18 (1988). On *álastos* / *aldástōr* and the uncertainty between "unforgettable" and "unforgetful," see L. Slatkin, "The Wrath of Thetis," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 116 (1986): 19n.

necessary to deconstruct this phrase in order to identify the unforgettable under the very generic designation of "ills" (of "misfortunes": *kaká*). The command *mē mnēsikakeîn* agrees less with *léthē kakôn* in its menacing sweetness than it is a way, by avoiding any explicit reference to oblivion, of canceling the never-formulated oxymoron that is hidden under "oblivion of ills": the oblivion of nonoblivion.

Let us draw the map of what does not forget and what is not forgotten. I named mourning, and wrath, which Helen's drug dissolves and which Alcaeus's insurgents wish they could forget; similarly, much later, in a small Arcadian city, wrath will replace the misfortunes not to be recalled during a reconciliation (and *mnēsikh-olán* is substituted for *mnēsikakeîn*).²⁷ They did not think any differently in the reconciled Athens of the end of the fifth century: because to stick to wrath would be to immortalize as the most precious of goods the past of the conflict that does not want to be past (the misfortunes); conversely, anyone who wants to attack the Thirty must be able with impunity to advise the Athenian jurors to oppose the tyrants with "the same anger as at the time of the exile."²⁸

Mourning and wrath: we will perhaps recall "the extreme grief" of the Athenians at the capture of Miletus. It so happens that the verb *huperákthomai* (with which, in the extreme, Herodotus doubtless means to indicate excess) is a quasi *hapax*, since to the occurrence in Herodotus, we can add only a single use, in Sophocles' *Electra*: the coryphaeus's advice to Electra, overwhelmed by the thought of a forgetful Orestes, is to abandon "a too painful wrath" (*huperalgē khólōn*), and to give to those she hates "neither too much affliction nor complete oblivion" (*mēth' . . . huperákthēo mēt' epiláthou*). On one side, oblivion; on the other, living memory that bears no other name than excess of grief. In Sophocles, *Electra* is in fact the perfect incarnation of this living memory that, hardly metaphorically, is a goad, of this grief-wrath that characterizes Achilles (*khólōn thumalgéa*), and when she claims *ou láthei m'orgá*, she says not only "My anger does not

²⁷ Alpheira inscription (third century B.C.): T. Riele, *Mnemosyne* 21 (1968): 343.

²⁸ *Lysias Against Eratosthenes* 96.

escape me" or "I do not forget my anger," but also "My anger does not forget me." As if only anger gave to the self the courage to be entirely given to anger, because for the subject, anger is uninterrupted presence of self to self.²⁹

It is left to the citizen-spectators gathered in the theater to guess what, for the city, is the ultimate danger in this anger that does not forget, because it is the worst enemy of politics: anger as mourning makes the ills it cultivates "grow" assiduously, and it is a bond that tightens itself until it resists all untying.³⁰ Dread wrath . . . And with reason: in this case, tragedy borrows the notion from the most ancient poetic tradition, and most particularly from epic, which from the first word of the *Iliad* gives to this very active affect the name *mēnis*. Wrath of Achilles and, later, wrath of mourning mothers, from Demeter to Clytemnestra. If it were not for Achilles, whose *mēnis* is in all Greek memories, I would readily say that we have here a female model of memory,³¹ which the cities try to confine within the anti- (or ante-) political sphere. And, in fact, wrath in mourning, the principle of which is eternal repetition, willingly expresses itself with an *aei*,³² and the fascination of this tireless "always" threatens to set it up as a powerful rival to the political *aei* that establishes the memory of institutions.³³

²⁹ *huperákthomai*: Herodotus 6.21.1; coryphaeus's advice: Sophocles *Electra* 177–78. For the goad, see Sophocles *Oedipus Rex* 1317–18: "How the sting of the goads has entered me together with the memory of evils (*mnēmē kakōn*)." *khólōn thumalgēa*: *Iliad* 9.260, 565; *ou láthei m'orgá*: *Electra* 222.

³⁰ *Electra*, 259–60, 140–42, 230, 1246–48; *álutōn* in the *Iliad*: the fetters (13.37) and the bond of war (13.360). We will recall that, in civic language, the noun most often used of the reconciliation—including in the year 403—is *diálusis* 'untying' (see Aristotle *Athenian Constitution* 39.1, as well as 38.4 and 40.1), as if civil war were the strongest of bonds.

³¹ As regards Achilles, Laura Slatkin, in *The Wrath of Thetis* (Berkeley, 1991), suggests that the hero's *mēnis* is a displaced rereading of the "wrath" of his mother, Thetis.

³² Among Lyotard's categories, it falls under "identical repetition" ("répétition identique"), a mode of sentence in which the mark is upon the speaker and not, as in the "Jewish" sentence, on the addressee (*Le Différend* [Paris, 1983], 157).

³³ *Aei* of *Electra*: nineteen instances in Sophocles' *Electra* (we should note that

Two more words on this *mēnis*, considered dangerous from the very beginning, to the point that whoever is the seat of it is prohibited from using the very name, to the point that the hypogrammatical utterance of the *Iliad*—*I renounce my *mēnis*—is never pronounced.³⁴ *Mēnis*: what lasts, what holds well, and nevertheless is doomed, as if by necessity, to become the object of renunciation. *Mēnis*: a word to hide the memory whose name is concealed by it.³⁵ Another memory, much more formidable than *mnēmē*. A memory that reduces itself completely to nonoblivion. In fact, we may guess that, in nonoblivion, the negation must be understood in its performativeness: the "unforgetting" establishes itself. And, just as it was necessary to forget the strength of the denial hidden behind the "ills," a recurrent utterance shows the renunciation of memory-anger: it is necessary to deny—assuming that it is possible—the denial that has stiffened upon itself.

Which takes us back to *álaston pénthos*, this mourning that refuses to accomplish itself.³⁶

Álastos, then: like *alētheia*, it is built on a negation of the root of oblivion. And yet it is a very different way of not being in oblivion. It

this *aei* disappears and does not return until Orestes takes action). *Aei* and institutional memory: [Lysias] *Against Andocides* 25, where it is the entity Athens (*Athēnai*) and not the collectivity of Athenians (*Athēnatoi*) that is the subject all-memory (*aeimnēstōi*). As for the antepolitical aspect of *mēnis*, we might doubt that such a thing exists if we consider, with L. Gernet (*Recherches sur le développement de la pensée juridique et morale en Grèce* [Paris, 1917], 148), that the verb *mēniō* designates (always?) a collective feeling in Herodotus.

³⁴ I am referring here to the remarkable analysis of C. Watkins, "A propos de *mēnis*," *Bulletin de la société de linguistique* 72 (1977): 187–209. See now L. Muellner, *The Anger of Achilles: Mēnis in Early Greek Epic* (Ithaca, 1996).

³⁵ Popular etymology relates the word to *mēnō*, because it concerns a lasting wrath (Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*); in spite of Chantraine, I consider the etymology that makes *mēnis* a deformation of an original **mnānis* (Watkins, "A propos de *mēnis*," 205–6; Muellner, *Anger of Achilles*, app.) compelling.

³⁶ See P. Pucci's remarks in *Odysseus Polutropos: Intertextual Readings in the "Odyssey" and the "Iliad"* (Ithaca, 1987), 199.

is hardly surprising that in Greek language and thought, *alétheia* has prevailed as the "positive" noun for truth, while prose forgot *álastos*. It is doubtless the result of the same euphemizing process that, in place of the verb *alasteîn*, equivalent of Arcadian *erínúein*, "to be enraged" (where we easily recognize the vengeful Erinys), classical prose substituted the less threatening *mnēsikakeîn*, this "opposite of amnesty."³⁷

Mourning, wrath. And the philologists wonder: mourning or wrath? But, in *alasteîn*, this choice once more belongs to the realm of the indeterminable. Which for all that does not mean that the verb functions, without reference to its etymology, as a derivative of *pénthos*, to which, so often, *álaston* is adjoined,³⁸ or of *khólos*, but rather that mourning and wrath are naturally associated with each other insofar as they both participate in nonoblivion. *Alast-*, then: matrix of meaning to express the *páthos* (or, in Phrynichus's version, the *dráma*) of an irreparable loss, be it a disappearance (*álaston pénthos* of Penelope at the thought of Odysseus, of Tros weeping over his son Ganymede in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*) or a death (*álaston pénthos* of Eupéithes). And this *páthos* is piercing: *álaston odúromai*, "I grieve without forgetting," says Eumaios to Odysseus.³⁹ Or rather: Never do I forget to grieve, I cannot stop grieving. Thus it turns out that, just as *mēnis*, *álaston* expresses the atemporal duration, immobilized in a negative will, and immortalizing the past in the present.

Insomnia of Menelaus, blood of the parricide and the incest that Oedipus cannot forget: there is an obsessive component to *álaston*, a relentless presence that occupies, in the strong sense of the word, the

³⁷ "Contraire de l'amnistie," so Gernet (*La pensée juridique et morale*, 324-25); Gernet glosses *alasteîn* as "to be irritated by a wrath that does not forget" ("être irrité d'un courroux qui n'oublie pas").

³⁸ Cf. G. Nagy, in the mode of "as if" (*Comparative Studies in Greek and Indic Meter* [Cambridge, Mass., 1974], 258).

³⁹ The *mēnis* of Achilles against Agamemnon doubtless arises from Achilles' loss of *timé*, not from the loss of someone dear; but not only does he behave precisely as if he had lost more than a son or a brother, which, while it would still require compensation (*Iliad* 9.632f.), surpasses all *timé*, but it will not be long before he knows—because of this very *mēnis*—the *álaston pénthos* of having lost his double. *álaston odúromai*: *Odyssey* 14.174.

subject and does not leave. Another example: before the final duel with Achilles, Hector begs his adversary to exchange a reciprocal promise not to mutilate the corpse of the dead enemy. Refusal of Achilles: "Do not, *álaste*, talk of agreements." And he adds that there can no more be a faithful treaty between them than between the wolf and the lamb, before concluding: "You will pay all at once for the sorrows of my companions, whom you killed with the fury of your spear." *Álaste*: "accursed," some translate. And there is something of that: Achilles knows that, as far as he is concerned, Hector is unforgettable, like an obsession, just as Patroclus is. Unforgettable in that he killed the one whom Achilles neither wants to nor can forget.⁴⁰

And here is the murderer side by side with his victim in nonoblivion. Which leads me to call up yet another derivative of the root *alast-*: *alástōr*, the name of the criminal insofar as he has "committed unforgettable acts (*álēsta*), things that will be remembered for a long time," Plutarch says;⁴¹ but also the name of the avenging demon of the dead victim, who tirelessly pursues the murderer.

Nonoblivion is a ghost. *Alástōr*, or *alítērios*, what "wanders," in popular etymology (from the verb *aláomai*), or what must absolutely be avoided, in Plutarch (*aleúasthai*).⁴²

Did the Greeks live, as the often-quoted title of a book puts it, "in the grip of the past"?⁴³ The fascination that becomes manifest at every mention of "unforgetting mourning" would definitely seem to indicate that they did. But we must go the whole way; because they recognized it perhaps and were on their guard, as with many of their fascinations, the Greeks have not ceased (and this since the *Iliad* and Achilles' wrath, however superbly dramatized) to try to cast out non-oblivion as the most threatening of the forces of insomnia.⁴⁴ Ideally, as

⁴⁰ Insomnia of Menelaus: *Odyssey* 4.108; Oedipus: Sophocles *Oedipus at Colonus* 1672; refusal of Achilles: *Iliad* 22.261.

⁴¹ Plutarch *Greek Questions* 25, in *Moralia* 297a.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ B. A. Van Groningen, *In the Grip of the Past: Essay on an Aspect of Greek Thought* (Leiden, 1953).

⁴⁴ I think here of Y. Yerushalmi, *Zakhôr: Histoire juive et mémoire juive*, trans.

at the end of the *Oresteia*, it should be neutralized without being completely lost: it should be domesticated by being installed in the city, defused, indeed turned against itself. Thus, by the will of Athena, the Erinyes proclaim that they renounce their fury and agree to keep watch at the foot of the Areopagus while the city sleeps.⁴⁵ But this is a delicate operation, such as only a divinity can bring to a successful conclusion. And when wrath reclaims its autonomy and *stásis alitiēriódēs* comes in turn,⁴⁶ everything must be done to avert the threat of *álaston*: then, not being able really to forget it, they will forget it in words, in order to forbid memory of misfortunes.

Everything happened between negations: since the privative *a-* of *álaston* will always be more powerful than any verb "to forget," we might as well avoid *alasteín* and have recourse to *mnēsikakeín*, even if it means bringing this memory definitively under negation. All this under the protection of the most inflexible of negations: *mé*, which in itself expresses the ban.

Power of the Negative, Strength of the Negation

Nonoblivion is all-powerful insofar as it has no limits—and especially not those of a subject's interiority.

Let us go back to Hector *álastos*. Or, to have recourse to a more common term, to *alástōr*. Between the killer and the vengeful demon of the dead victim, nonoblivion is undivided only because it surpasses both; it is between them, but also very much before and very much after, and they themselves are absorbed in it. Thus Plutarch can now make *alástōr* the designation of the criminal and treat this word under the heading "anger of demons" (*mēnimata daimónōn*) and speak of

E. Vigne (Paris, 1984), 118–19, quoting Borges and Nietzsche (*Considérations in-actuelles*, trans. G. Bianquis [Paris, 1964], 119) on what threatens contemporary historiography.

⁴⁵ Aeschylus *Eumenides* 690–93, 700–706.

⁴⁶ See Plato *Republic* 5.470d6; *alitiērios*, from which *alitiēriódēs* is derived. Although it has a different etymology, the formal proximity to *alástōr* nevertheless makes it a doublet of that word (Chantraine, *Dictionnaire*, s.v. *alētiēs*).

those spirits that we call unforgetting avengers (*alástores*) and blood-avengers (*palamnaíoi*), as they pursue the memory of ancient (*palaiá*), foul, and unforgettable (*álēsta*) acts.

(Plutarch *Obsolescence of Oracles* 418b–c)

In one case as in the other, he uses the unforgettable as an explanatory principle. That being the case, it is certainly vain to build a history of the word, as philologists might, where *alástōr* would be, for example, first the avenger, then the killer; but it is not enough either to invoke a "law of participation," if we are then to stick with the notion of a "point of departure" that can be indifferently the defiled guilty one or the "ghost."⁴⁷ Unless we would ascribe to this ghost the model of the principle of nonoblivion: much more than "the polluting act"⁴⁸ but also much more than a simple inner state. At the same time outside and inside, sinister reality and psychic experience, as L. Gernet very well expressed it with regard to the Erinyes. With the exception that in this case he speaks of "supernatural . . . reality," and that, concerning nonoblivion, I would prefer to insist on its *materiality*, indissociable from its psychic dimension.

Let a chorus of the *Electra* be where, to multiply the negations still further, the affirmation of nonoblivion gives way to the declaration of nonamnesty:

He never forgets (*ou pot' amnastel*), your begetter, the leader of the Greeks,
and neither does the ancient brazen axe with double edge
that killed him in shameful outrage.

(Sophocles *Electra* 481–85)

Neither the dead victim—who, in the *Choephoroi*, was asked to recall the fatal bath—nor the murder instrument, also believed to be un-

⁴⁷ History: Chantraine, *Dictionnaire*, s.v. *alástōr*; "law of participation": Gernet, *La pensée juridique et morale*, 319–20.

⁴⁸ Of which R. Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford, 1983), 108–9, would like to make the unifying principle, because it centers everything on pollution.

forgetting: the dyad of the victim and of the death weapon is apparently asymmetrically substituted for the couple of the deceased and the murderer.⁴⁹ Encompassing time and space completely, nonoblivion is everywhere, active at every stage of the process. It is there for the materiality of the *álaston* that silently keeps watch against oblivion. Still this list would be incomplete if we did not add to it the "misfortune" (*kakón*) itself, equally credited with refusing amnesty (but we know that "the misfortunes" euphemistically replace the "unforgetting" in compound verbs).⁵⁰ Again, a few verses of the *Electra* bear witness:

Never to be veiled, . . . never to be undone (*óu pote katalúsimon*),
never to forget (*oudé pote lésómenon*), so great
is our sorrow.

(1246-47)

"Never will sorrow forget":⁵¹ it is Electra who is speaking, yet no Greek hero believes in his own inner autonomy more than Electra. As if the undivided⁵² and silent force in the subject became pure will intent on its staying power: control, perhaps, but who is controlling whom in this matter?

Electra, of course, believes she is; at any rate, she lets what wants to

⁴⁹ Aeschylus *Choephoroi* 491-93. We will note that the murder weapon is no longer a tool, but a subject credited with the killing of Agamemnon; thus in the Prytaneum, Athenian law judges objects that have "caused" the death of a man; see M. Simondon, *La mémoire et l'oubli dans la pensée grecque* (Paris, 1982), 218-19.

⁵⁰ We may add to this list the evocation of Phineus's sons, blinded by a stepmother and the orb of whose eyes is itself labeled *aldstör* in the *Antigone* (974).

⁵¹ Mazon (Collection des universités de France) retreats before the evidence and resorts to the passive voice; Simondon (*ibid.*) chooses a "voluntarily equivocal" ("volontairement équivoque") translation: "who cannot know oblivion" ("qui ne peut pas connaître l'oubli"); with Jebb, the illustrious English editor of Sophocles, we must understand "one sorrow which cannot forget."

⁵² Perhaps something of this undividedness can still be seen in the double accusative—of the person recalling and of the object recalled—governed by *anamimnēskō* (the verb that designates Phrynichus's intervention in Herodotus).

speak inside herself speak repetitively. And, as if one never asserted something better than in denying it, she uses only negative utterances:

In the midst of dreadful things, I shall not
hold on to these calamities.

(223-24)

or again:

For this will be called indissoluble (*áluta keklésetai*),
and I shall never cease from my troubles.

(230-31)

A negation, a verbal form in the future. Refusal and control of time, such appears to be the preferred linguistic formula to assert the oblivionless existence of Electra. But there is also the recourse to negations in series, accumulations in which logic that deducts and cancels threatens to lose itself to the profit of an assertion with a purely negative intensity:

But I shall not cease from my lament and
my wretched cries.

And I shall not cease, like a nightingale,⁵³ killer of her young,
with a loud cry, in front of my father's doors,
to make it echo for all.

(103-10)

Here is one sentence, only one, where no grammarian could find his bearings; let us wager that the Athenian public understood in it the intensity of the refusal. Electra also says:

⁵³ See N. Loraux, "Le deuil du rossignol," in *Varia 7 of Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse* 34 (1986): 251-76.

I do not wish to abandon this,
and not to lament my wretched father.

(131-32)

And the negative formulation becomes a claim for omnipotence and a plan for eternity. Nothing of that recourse to litotes we sometimes think is detectable in the utterance of nonoblivion.⁵⁴ Just the opposite, the reduplication that reinforces the negation, as in *ou pote amnastei* 'No, he does not forget,' or the eternity of a future perfect (*tade aluta keklēsetai* 'Forever it will be called indissoluble').⁵⁵ It is up to us, listening to Freud, to understand in all these utterances the same denial, and the confession, made without the speaker's knowledge, that in fact one shall renounce and disown the wrath to which the future gave assurances of an unlimited becoming; it is up to us especially to understand the confession that the excessive negation will nevertheless be fought—vanquished, or at least silenced, and already forgotten—by another negation, for renunciation also expresses itself with a great many verbs meaning "to deny": *apeipon* in the case of Achilles, and *apennēpō* in the case of the Erinyes, compelled to revoke the prohibitions they had uttered against Athens.⁵⁶

Because the Unforgetful has always been the Forgotten.⁵⁷

To put an end to the game of the double negation, it is time to go back to Athens of 403, to that decree and to that oath that proclaim amnesty.

Expressed in an indirect style, as decrees must be, in which writing at the same time presents and subordinates to itself the statement that is effectively expressed,⁵⁸ the prohibition of memory is ready to inte-

⁵⁴ Watkins, "A propos de *mēnis*," 209, commenting on the formula *ou . . . lēlēthe* (Solon 13 West, line 25).

⁵⁵ See C. J. Ruijgh, "L'emploi onomastique de *keklēsthai*," in *Mélanges Kamerbeek* (Amsterdam, 1976), 379.

⁵⁶ *Iliad* 19.67, 35, 74-75; Aeschylus *Eumenides* 957.

⁵⁷ "L'Oublié": J.-F. Lyotard, *Heidegger et "les juifs"* (Paris, 1988).

⁵⁸ In comedy, on the other hand, the prohibition is often uttered in a direct style

grate itself—as a citation—in a historian's narrative or in those paradigmatic recollections of the past that the orators use ("Then the 'prohibition against recalling the misfortunes' came under an oath": *tò mē mnēsikakeîn*). The prohibition has been transformed into a *rhēma*, a reified saying, turning into a maxim, into a definitely non-current exemplum.⁵⁹ Because "the narrative is perhaps the genre of discourse in which the heterogeneity of genres of sentences and even that of genres of discourses find the best place to make themselves forgotten."⁶⁰

The city forbids, then, taking the stance of eternity, but it masks the formulation of this act of forbidding. The oath is left, which must be taken by all the citizens, but one by one. Or again, by each individual Athenian, uttering in the first person: "I shall not recall the misfortunes." *Ou mnēsikakēsō*: as regards the ban, which is always subordinate to the reminder that there was a decision, the oath is a speech act.⁶¹ It decrees, by engaging the oath taker, but the subject gains by speaking as an "I," and by endowing his commitment with the power of future negative utterances. I shall not recall: I shall prevent myself from recalling. Thus each citizen makes sure at the same time of himself and of the future.

Yet everything can be turned upside down once more. To silence memory, the Athenian oath taker certainly speaks in the same mode as Electra proclaiming her will not to forget. It is not, however, an

(Aristophanes *Lysistrata* 590; *Ploutos* 1146); but, spoken to a single addressee, it becomes burlesque.

⁵⁹ Historians' narrative: Xenophon *Hellenica* 2.4.43; Aristotle *Athenian Constitution* 39.6 (cites the text of the agreement); see also Andocides *On the Mysteries* 77, 79, 81, as well as Thucydides 4.74; citation of orators: Aeschines *On the Embassy* 176; *rhēma*: Aeschines *Against Ctesiphon* 208.

⁶⁰ "Le récit est peut-être le genre de discours dans lequel l'hétérogénéité des genres de phrases et même celle des genres de discours trouvent au mieux à se faire oublier" (Lyotard, *Le Différend*, 218; on the noncurrency of the citation, see p. 55).

⁶¹ Quoted as such, the oath breaks off a narrative for more effectiveness: see Andocides *On the Mysteries* 90-91. That this utterance is not peculiar to Athens's domestic policy is attested by many inscriptions, some non-Athenian and some about foreign policy.

oath that Electra is taking—what, as a matter of fact, is an oath to oneself, without divine witnesses? As if the simple proclamation of the unforgetful being were enough to seal the commitment! If it is true that only the oath allows amnesty to overcome resentment, it is because it owes its actuality to the double guarantee that surrounds oath language: that of the gods, invoked as witnesses and ready to punish, and that—especially—of the curse, dreadful machine for punishing perjury that the oath taker unleashes in advance against himself as if it were foreseen that he would repudiate himself. A guarantee more than human is required to prevent the negation from being unmade into denial, and so that no one may dare simply to erase it by subtraction. Magic is required to break the *álaston pénthos*,⁶² and to force the *álaston* back on this side of words, politics needs religion.⁶³

I shall not forget: I shall not bear resentment. From one utterance to the next, there is all the difference of the ritual of speech, and one hopes it will give the greater actuality to the less-marked of the two sentences.

To conclude, let us try to consider the two ends of the story together.

With each Athenian having sworn for himself, the city expects that the sum of these individual commitments will restore the collectivity; and, on that same occasion, the city shields itself from the consequences of perjury, by necessity individual. By thus making sure of the gods' assistance, political authority can establish itself as the censor of memory, alone authorized to decide what is and what must not be the use made of it.

Similarly, the opening of the *Iliad* can invoke no one else than the Muse, because only the daughter of Memory knows how to tell a *ménis* without letting the story be affected by the terrible aura of its object; converting wrath into glory, then, the Muse opens the

⁶² Nagy, *Comparative Studies*, 258.

⁶³ See the meaningful remarks of Isocrates in *Against Callimachus* 3 and 23–25.

way of good *anámnēsis*, and the poet is the pure instrument of this transubstantiation.

Restored to its integrity by virtue of the agreement, the community is reestablished and decides. It prohibits any recalling of a litigious past, displaced because contentious, as if Memory appeared in place of Lethe among the dreaded children of Night, as daughter of Strife (Eris). Each Athenian must forget what the *stásis* was if he can, and, whether he can or cannot, each must obey the city by devising for himself a mechanism against the lucid vertigo of *álaston*.

And politics reasserts itself, the civic and reassuring version of the oblivion of misfortunes. Oblivion disappears, erased in amnesty's favor, yet the misfortunes remain. But who would still recall that among the "misfortunes" banned from memory is hidden the very thing that, in the poetical tradition, refused oblivion?