

Also by Jalal Toufic

Two or Three Things I'm Dying to Tell You (Post-Apollo, 2005)

Undying Love, or Love Dies (Post-Apollo, 2002)

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Over-Sensitivity (Sun & Moon, 1996)

(Vampires): An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film (Station Hill, 1993; revised and expanded ed., Post-Apollo, 2003)

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‘Āshûrâ’: This Blood Spilled in My Veins

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‘Āshûrâ’: This Blood Spilled in My Veins

Jalal Toufic

Forthcoming Books

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‘Āshûrâ’; or, Torturous Memory as a Condition of Possibility of an Unconditional Promise

Can one still give and maintain millenarian promises in the twenty first century? But first, a more basic question: can one still promise at all?

Al-Husayn, the grandson of the prophet Muhammad and the son of the first Shi‘ite imâm, ‘Alî b. Abî Tâlib, was slaughtered alongside many members of his family in the desert in 680. This memory is torture to me.

“I am not allowed to weep, because I’ll become blind were I to do so,” says old Victoria Rizqallah at the end of my video ‘Āshûrâ’: *This Blood Spilled in My Veins*, 2002. But wouldn’t losing the ability to weep be even more detrimental and sadder than going blind? I would prefer to (be able to) weep even were I to go blind as a result of that—to weep over going blind? Isn’t that better than becoming inhuman? “For others too can see, or sleep, / But only human eyes can weep” (Andrew Marvell, “Eyes and Tears”).



But, basically, one can say *this memory is torture to me* of every memory, since each reminiscence envelops at some level the memory of the origin of memory, the torture that had to be inflicted on humans in order for them to be able to remember. If we feel a tinge of pain, a pang, when we remember it is not necessarily because the past vanishes, is no more (Einstein’s relativity and Dōgen’s Zen tell us otherwise in two different ways),¹ but because each memory reactivates in us however faintly the genealogy of the establishment of memory. In Twelver Shi‘ites’ yearly ten-day commemoration ‘Āshûrâ’, we witness a condition of possibility of memory, in a Nietzschean sense.

“To breed an animal *with the right to make promises*—is not this the paradoxical task that nature has set itself in the case of man? is it not the real problem regarding man?

“That this problem has been solved to a large extent must seem all the more remarkable to anyone who appreciates the strength of the opposing force, that of *forgetfulness*. Forgetting is no mere *vis inertiae* as the superficial imagine; it is rather an active and in the strictest sense positive faculty of repression...²

“Now this animal which needs to be forgetful, in which forgetting represents a force, a form of *robust* health, has bred in itself an opposing faculty, a memory, with the aid of which forgetfulness is abrogated in certain cases—namely in those cases where promises are made...

“How can one create a memory for the human animal? How can one impress something upon this partly obtuse, partly flighty mind, attuned only to the passing moment, in such a way that it will stay there?”

“One can well believe that the answers and methods for solving this primeval problem were not precisely gentle; perhaps indeed there was nothing more fearful and uncanny in the whole prehistory of man than his *mnemotechnics*. ‘If something is to stay in memory it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to *hurt* stays in the memory’³—this is a main



clause of the oldest (unhappily also the most enduring) psychology on earth.⁴ One might even say that wherever on earth solemnity, seriousness, mystery, and gloomy coloring still distinguish the life of man and a people, something of the terror that formerly attended all promises, pledges and vows on earth is *still effective*... Man could never do without blood, torture, and sacrifices when he felt the need to create a memory for himself; the most dreadful sacrifices and pledges (sacrifices of the first-born among them),⁵ the most repulsive mutilations (castration, for example),⁶ the cruelest rites of all the



religious cults (and all religions are at the deepest level systems of cruelties)—all this has its origin in the instinct that realized that pain is the most powerful aid to mnemonics.

“If we place ourselves at the end of this tremendous process, where the tree at last brings forth fruit, where society and the morality of custom at last reveal *what* they have simply been the means to, then we discover that the ripest fruit is the *sovereign individual*, like only to himself, liberated again from morality of customs, autonomous and supramoral (for ‘autonomous’ and ‘moral’ are mutually exclusive), in short, the man who has his own independent, protracted will and the *right to make promises*... And just as he is bound to honor his peers, the strong and reliable (those with the *right* to make promises)—that is, all those

who promise like sovereigns, reluctantly, rarely, slowly, who are chary of trusting, whose trust is a mark of *distinction*, who give their word⁷ as something that can be relied on because they know themselves strong enough to maintain it in the face of accidents, even ‘in the face of fate’—he is bound to reserve... a rod for the liar who breaks his word even at the moment he utters it.

“... Ah, reason, seriousness, mastery over the affects, the whole somber thing called reflection, all these prerogatives and showpieces of man: how dearly they have been bought! How much blood and cruelty lie at the bottom of all ‘good things!’”⁸



The preservation of the events of ‘Āshûrâ’ takes place at two levels: in ‘*âlam al-mithâl* (The World of the Archetypal Images), aka ‘*âlam al-khayâl* (The World of the Imagination),⁹ where they are, in a transfigured version, eternal, outside the corrosive, dimming sway of chronological time, as well as the labyrinthine temporality of the realm of undeath, where al-Husayn would run the risk of forgetting who he is, of forgetting himself; and in historical time, through the bodily and emotional tortures endured during the yearly ten-day commemorative ceremony,¹⁰ which are the means to breed in the human being,¹¹ a forgetful creature (“And verily We made a covenant of old with Adam, but he forgot, and We found no constancy in him” [Qur’ân 20:115]), a historical memory. But the memory that the ceremony of ‘Āshûrâ’ is trying to maintain is not only or mainly that of the past, but the memory of the future, that of the promise of the coming of the Mahdî, the Shi’ite messiah, as well as the corresponding promise of Twelver Shi’ites to wait for him. The exemplary promise has until now been the messianic one, for at least three

reasons. First, it has been the longest lasting, spanning centuries, even millennia. Second, it has been maintained “in the face of accidents, even ‘in the face of fate’ ”: Twelver Shi‘ites have maintained the promise to wait for the successor of al-Hasan al-‘Askari, the eleventh imâm, who died in 260 AH/873-74, even though the latter apparently left no son, and even though the occultation of the presumed twelfth imâm has by now persisted for over a millennium; and they have maintained their expectation that the twelfth imâm will fulfill his promise to appear again. Third, it implicates a supramoral, antinomian attitude. Hence Sabbatai Zevi’s “strange actions,” which included causing ten Israelites to eat “fat of the kidney” in 1658, an act that is strictly prohibited by the Torah and punishable by *excision* (getting cut off from among one’s people); reciting the following benediction over the ritually forbidden fat: “Blessed are Thou, O Lord, who permittest that which is forbidden”; and abolishing the fast of the Seventeenth of Tammuz in 1665. Hence also the Qarmatis’ sacking and desecration of the Ka‘ba in 930 and then their abolishing of the Shari‘a during the Zakariyya al-Isfahâni episode in Ahsâ’. And hence the Nizârîs’ abolishing of the Shari‘a starting with the proclamation by Hasan ‘*ala dhikrihi*’*l-salâm* (on his mention be peace) of the Great Resurrection in Alamût in 8 August 1164 from a pulpit facing west, a direction opposite to the Ka‘ba in Mecca, the direction toward which all Moslems have to turn during their prayer.¹² The basic and ultimate promise is to wait for the messiah, who, truly sovereign, supramoral, will initially break the Law, including the “laws” of nature¹³ (indeed his miraculous coming notwithstanding his death or millennial occultation is often announced by supernatural events “such as the rise of the sun from the west, and the occurrence of the solar and lunar eclipses in the middle and the end of the month of Ramadan, respectively, against the natural order of such phenomena”¹⁴), then, upon establishing redemption, altogether abolish the Law, which applies only to the unredeemed world, thus allowing his initiates to be resurrected into a lawless world.¹⁵ The ceremony of ‘Âshûrâ’ is the flip side of the belief in the promise of the hidden imâm. I would thus wager that the introduction of the ceremonies of ‘Âshûrâ’ and of Ta‘ziya

coincided with a period when Twelver Shi‘ism was not on the rise but, on the contrary, when the continued belief in the coming of the Mahdî was in danger of extinction. From this perspective, the condemnation of these ceremonies by many Twelver Shi‘ite ‘ulamâ’¹⁶ is either shortsighted or else implies that they would like to fully supplant the Mahdî. Were ‘Âshûrâ’ to be discontinued across the Twelver Shi‘ite community, then sooner or later the memory of the promise of the occulted imâm would fade away. The basic reason the ceremony’s participants hit themselves and self-flagellate¹⁷ is not some unreasonable feeling of guilt for not succoring imâm Husayn and his family around 1300 years ago, but that such cruelty is a most efficient mnemonic. Some may object that the morality of mores, etc., has already born fruit, namely the one who can promise on the basis of his ability to remember, and that therefore there is no longer any need for such a cruel mnemonic. This would be the case for promises of normal spans (but not for one that spans millennia),¹⁸ and were we not reaching a point where the immemorial process, described by Nietzsche, by which humans succeeded to a large extent to create a memory for themselves is beginning to be reversed. As Jean-Joseph Goux points out: “Every society has produced, exchanged, and consumed, but it is only in the modern era in the West that the economy has been separated from all religious, political, and moral ends in order to constitute a system ruled by its own laws, which are those of market exchange.... the exchange destroys the bond produced as it proceeds. The equivalent exchange is without memory and without obligation. It is a relation that cancels and neutralizes itself at the moment of its fulfillment.”¹⁹ And Paul Virilio, the thinker of dromology, writes: “*The acceleration of real time*, the limit-acceleration of the speed of light, not only dispels geophysical extension (...) but, first and foremost, it dispels the importance of the *longues durées* of the local time of regions, countries and the old, deeply territorialized nations. (...) Past, present and future—that tripartite division of the time continuum—then cedes primacy to the immediacy of a tele-presence... This is (...) the time of light and its

speed—a *cosmological constant* capable of conditioning human history.”²⁰ We started with a flighty mind attuned only to the passing moment; then we had a torturous process of thousands of years of pain and sacrifices to inculcate in humans a memory, and consequently a deep time; but we have now reached someone who is being conditioned by the hegemony of market exchange over all other ends, and programmed by telecommunications at the speed of light, for example TV (on average in the USA, children aged 2 to 11 watch about 23 hours of TV per week, and teenagers watch about 22 hours per week),²¹ to hear and see a live “event” anywhere in the world of globalization only to instantly forget about it: Rwanda, then sports, then a commercial for a soap brand, etc.; and to restrict his or her interaction with others to an economic transaction, “which by its symmetry and instantaneous reciprocity... is without fidelity or commitment, an abstract relation that exhausts the disaffected mutuality it implies, without leaving any trace.”²² In order to describe the human being at the beginning of the twenty first century in front of his TV, we can instead of resorting to Virilio’s contemporary terms revert to the terms Nietzsche was using to describe man in prehistory: “partly obtuse, partly flighty mind, attuned only to the passing moment.” We (or more precisely the West) will more and more be able to accurately predict through computer simulation,²³ but we (or more precisely the West) will less and less be able to give promises.

23 March 2002

Jalal Toufic, Beirut

jtoufic@cyberia.net.lb

Betty, Paris:

As for the book you volunteered to give me as a gift and promised to send to me, Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, one of the lines in the first edition of my first book, *Distracted*, says: “My apology turned out to be unnecessary, for he

had already forgiven my age”: isn’t youth the age when one gives so many promises—including to oneself—that remain unfulfilled—at least for a long time? Promising is one of those actions that seem to be the easiest—after all, it is a performative (see J.L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words*)—when actually it is the most difficult since unnatural: “To breed an animal *with the right to make promises*—is not this the paradoxical task that nature has set itself in the case of man?” (Nietzsche).

Best

Jalal

Notes

¹ Dōgen: “An ancient Buddha said: ‘For the time being stand on top of the highest peak.... / For the time being three heads and eight arms. / For the time being an eight- or sixteen-foot body...’ ‘For the time being’ here means time itself is being, and all being is time. A golden sixteen-foot body is time... ‘Three heads and eight arms’ is time... Yet an ordinary person who does not understand buddha-dharma may hear the words *the time-being* this way: ‘For a while I was three heads and eight arms.... Even though the mountains and rivers still exist, I have already passed them... Those mountains and rivers are as distant from me as heaven is from earth.’ It is not that simple. At the time the mountains were climbed and the rivers crossed, you were present. Time is not separate from you, and as you are present, time does not go away.” [“The Time-Being” (*uji*)].

² Cf. “Freud does not consider this amnesia [infantile amnesia] to be the result of any functional inability of the young child to record his impressions; instead, he attributes it to the repression which falls upon infantile sexuality (...). Just like hysterical amnesia, infantile amnesia can in principle be dispelled; it does not imply any destruction or absence of registrations of memories...” (J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The language of Psycho-analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, with an introduction by Daniel Lagache [New York: Norton, 1973], pp. 212-213).

³ Among other factors, we can call the long primeval period the “prehistory of man” for the following two complementary reasons. The first is that he had a flighty mind and was attuned only to the passing moment, and so was unable to produce the deep temporality of past/present/future required to construct a history. The second reason is that most of the torture to inculcate in him a memory, i.e. the most atrocious and frequent torture, was happening then, with the result that that period, the most traumatic of all, was and still is repressed, and consequently is not included in our history—it is as if it were humanity’s *infantile amnesia*.

⁴ Nietzsche's words apply far better to the distant past, for man could then withstand much more pain because he was much more superficial, whereas now, having to a large extent succeeded in creating a memory for himself and therefore being (temporally) far deeper, with few exceptions intense pain easily and quickly traumatizes him, ushering repression and consequently post-traumatic amnesia.

⁵ A long-term memory of the addressee of the promise is a precondition even for the promiser. Thus one of the conditions for God's promise to Abraham is that the latter create a memory for himself: "Then God said, 'Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.' (...) The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, 'I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed...'" (Genesis 22:2-18).

⁶ Clearly castration is here theorized from a different perspective than the one encountered in most feminist film criticism drawing on psychoanalysis (see Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema").

⁷ At the base of all language, at least once originally forgetful humanity has achieved the long-term memory that is a prerequisite of promising (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*), is not communication per se, but promising, thus the idiomatic expressions *be as good as your word* (to keep a promise [*Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms*]); *give your word* (to promise [*Ibid.*]); *man/woman of your word* (someone who keeps their promises [*Ibid.*]) (I wonder why we say "I give you my word" but we don't also say: "I give you my image"!)). Does "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1) also mean "in the beginning was the promise" since to give one's word is to promise? In the beginning God gave his Word, and it was that one day humans will be able to give their word, to promise. Has this promise disappeared with the Nietzschean death of God?

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale/*Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann; edited, with commentary, by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), pp. 57-62. I rearranged the order of one of the quote's paragraphs.

⁹ More specifically in *al-khayâl al-munfasil*. Ibn al-'Arabi "calls the intermediate world of imagination 'discontiguous imagination' (*al-khayâl al-munfasil*), since it exists independently of the viewer. And he names the soul along with the faculty of imagination 'contiguous imagination' (*al-khayâl al-muttasil*), since these are connected to the viewing subject." (William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* [Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1989], p. 117). The notion of *khayâl munfasil*, of an imagination independent of the viewer, which we find not only in the Sufism of Ibn al-'Arabi but also in Shi'ite theosophy, will regain currency with the advances in and spread of virtual reality; in Andy and Larry Wachowski's Gnostic film *The Matrix*, 1999, the vast simulation called the Matrix is an example of *khayâl munfasil*, while what each of those within the Matrix, i.e. within the *khayâl munfasil*, subjectively imagines is a *khayâl muttasil*.

¹⁰ Many of those present at the assemblies of 'Âshûrâ' cover their faces with their hands. When they remove their hands one often can see that they were crying. But sometimes, one suddenly espies through a gap between their fingers that they are yawning! In part these yawns are not the effect of boredom at hearing yet again the same stories of the atrocities, but of sleepiness, as these assemblies take place from around 9 p.m. till around midnight. This yawn has the same unsettling effect as the small spot of corruption in the otherwise uncorrupted corpse of a saint: "Ruysbroeck has been buried for five years; he is exhumed; his body is intact and pure (of course—otherwise, there would be no story); *but* 'there was only the tip of the nose which bore a faint but certain trace of corruption.' In the other's perfect and embalmed figure (for that is the degree to which it fascinates me) I perceive suddenly a speck of corruption. This speck is a tiny one: a gesture, a word, an object, a garment, something unexpected which appears (which dawns) from a region I had never even suspected, and suddenly attaches the loved object to a *commonplace* world.... I am *flabbergasted*: I hear a counter-rhythm: something like a syncope in the lovely phrase of the loved

being, the noise of a rip in the smooth envelope of the Image” (“The Tip of the Nose,” in Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard [New York: Hill and Wang, 1978], p. 25). The sleepiness affecting these yawning participants is of the kind that affected the three disciples Jesus Christ selected to accompany him for prayer. He asked them: “Stay here and watch with Me” (Matthew 26:38). He moved *a stone’s throw* (Luke 22:41—how incisive is the laconism of this *a stone’s throw*) and prayed. Returning to them, he found the three sleeping: “What? Could you not watch with Me one hour?” (Matthew 26:40). Three times does he leave them to pray, each time, upon returning, finding them sleeping. “Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is being betrayed...” (Matthew 26:45).

¹¹ “Respecting the derivation of *insân* [a human being], authors differ (...): the Basrees say that it is from *al-insu* [sociability], and its measure is *fi’lân*; (...) some say that it is from *înâs*, signifying ‘perception,’ or ‘sight,’ and ‘knowledge,’ and ‘sensation’ (...) and Mohammad Ibn-‘Arafah El-Wäsatee says that men are called *insiyûn* because they are seen (*yu’nasûn*, i.e. *yurawn*) and that the jinn are called *jinn* because they are [ordinarily] concealed (*mujtannûn*, i.e. *mutawârîn*.) from the sight of men (...) some (namely, the Koofees, *Misbâh al-Fayyûmî*) say that it is originally *insiyân* (Ibn Barrî, author of the *Annotations on the Sihâh*, with Al-Bustî, *Misbâh al-Fayyûmî, Tâj al-‘Arûs*.) of the measure *if’ilân*, from *an-nisyân* [“forgetfulness”], (*al-Misbâh*), and contracted to make it more easy of pronunciation, because of its being so often used.” The entry *alif nûn sîn* in Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, 8 volumes (Beirut, Lebanon: Librairie du Liban, 1980).

¹² The Great Resurrection of Alamût lasted till 1210.

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche: “I beware of speaking of chemical ‘laws’: that savours of morality.” *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 630.

¹⁴ Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: The Idea of the Mahdi in Twelver Shi’ism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), p. 158.

¹⁵ I find this period so unjust that it seems to me there are, beside the revolutionary one, two exemplary responses to it: a messianic one and a Gnostic one. The first demands waiting for the messiah (“which is the best of actions during his occultation”), who will in the end fill with justice a world only *transiently* filled with injustice since it is essentially and ultimately good, being created by God, the good God. The second demands the disinvestment from this *demonic* world, which has nothing to do with the good God, but was created by a demiurge.

¹⁶ For example Muhsin al-Amîn: see *Thawrat al-tanzîh: Risâlat al-tanzîh, talîha mawâqif minha wa-arâ’ fi al-Sayyid Muhsin al-Amîn*, ed. Muhammad al-Qâsim al-Husaynî al-Najafî (Bayrût: Dâr al-Jadîd, 1996).

¹⁷ Many a flagellant’s slap against his chest is as sober as the flapping of a bird’s wing during flight.

¹⁸ While we should be willing to pay the price for the ability to give promises, and therefore for the memory that is a precondition for promises, should we make sure that promises do not span centuries or millennia, given that the price of such promises is exorbitant?

¹⁹ Jean-Joseph Goux, “Subversion and Consensus: Proletarians, Women, Artists,” in *Terror and Consensus: Vicissitudes of French Thought*, ed. Jean-Joseph Goux and Philip R. Wood (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 37 and 39.

²⁰ Paul Virilio, *The Information Bomb*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 118-119.

²¹ 1992 figures; they were 28 hours per week and 23.5 hours per week, respectively, in 1986 (1986 Nielsen Report on Television). According to the Center for Media Education in Washington, DC, watching TV is the #1 after-school activity for 6 to 17 year olds; each year most children spend about 1500 hours in front of the TV and 900 hours in the classroom; and by age 70, most people will have spent about 10 years watching TV.

²² Jean-Joseph Goux, “Subversion and Consensus: Proletarians, Women, Artists,” in *Terror and Consensus: Vicissitudes of French Thought*, ed. Jean-Joseph Goux and Philip R. Wood, p. 39.

²³ Indeed live prematurely in the future through virtual reality using the simulation of extremely powerful computers.