

Teaching the Event: Deconstruction, Hauntology, and the Scene of Pedagogy

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Education is an event. More precisely, it is haunted by the event. All the aporias of education, all its desires and frustrations, everything we love about education and everything that drives us mad, has its ground without ground not in an ontology or a methodology or a psychology of education but a hauntology. Only as a hauntology is the philosophy of education possible. That will be my hypothesis today.¹

Allow me to begin with a scene you will all find familiar. When our children were still attending the public schools in our township, I stood for election for the school board. We were trying to elect the first Democrat in the history of the township school board and my appointed task was to run to the left of the person we were really trying to elect and make her appear moderate. Needless to say I relished the task. My only hesitation was the fear that I would be collateral damage, that is, that we would succeed so well that I too would be elected and then I would have to attend all the school board meetings. In that case my first official act would have been to demand a recount. The issue was, of course — what else? — school taxes. What would have been very funny about the campaign, were it not also so serious, was that we had only one real issue with which to appeal to our Republican friends — not the welfare of the children, not fairness to the teachers, not the well-being of the country, not the future. The only thing that appealed to them was property values. The local realtors made generous use of the well-known quality of the township schools in advertising, which drove up property values, and if the voters wrecked the schools, they would destroy their own property values. You get what you pay for. They heard that argument and we were able to elect our moderate candidate.

The other thing that struck me during the campaign was the threat that the teachers had put on the table to spook the township, that if these issues were not fairly resolved, they would “work the contract.” As you well know, that means they would do everything agreed to in the contract but not a thing more, not a thing that the contract did not spell out — not a single extra moment after the dismissal bell, not a single extra phone call to a parent, not a single extra session with a student, not a single extra effort in any regard on any matter that could not be legally demanded of them. Just the contract. Of course, this was a specter, a nightmare, a monster; because everyone knows that it is precisely this something extra that makes the difference, that makes the schools run. The teachers must make the contract work. If they work the contract, the contract will not work.

THE APORIAS OF THE GIFT

While this scene is a familiar one to you, allow me to defamiliarize it by redescribing it in the framework of “deconstruction” and the logic, or rather alogic, of the “gift” in a deconstructive analysis. My goal is to take a familiar scene found

with unhappy regularity in almost any school district in America and to redescribe it as a scene overrun by the aporias of contemporary French philosophy. This may seem like an attempt to explain something perfectly clear by means of something very obscure, like explaining why the roof leaks by starting with quantum mechanics. If so, I apologize. Well, on second thought, I do not. That is why I am here.

This is, in my view, an exquisitely deconstructive scene, an almost perfect illustration of the dynamics of the “gift” in deconstruction.² The gift seems to be the simplest of things: A gives x to B. Nothing could be simpler. But notice how difficult, how elusive this is; it is almost impossible, we might say. Maybe even the impossible itself. All that A wants to do is to give x to B, and to do so generously, without the expectation of return, freely, gratuitously:

- A: Take it, it's yours.
 B: But you should not have done that.
 A: Of course not, that's why it is a gift.
 B: I don't know how to repay you.
 A: I am not asking you to repay me. It's a gift. Take it, enjoy.
 B: I will always be in your debt.
 A: I don't want you to be in my debt. I want you to enjoy it.
 B: You are too kind.
 A: I am not trying to be kind. I just want you to have this gift.

I am trying to give a gift, to give something away, something that leaves my possession and thereafter leads another life I cannot control. Take the gift, it is yours. But as soon as the gift is given the gift begins to annul itself, to establish an economy in which the one to whom the gift is given incurs a debt, an obligation, which will impel him or her to find some way to repay this gift and discharge this debt, even while the more purely the giver tries to give this gift, the more generous the giver seems. So the result is that the one to whom something is given ends up in debt, while the giver who has given something away has come out ahead. As soon as it is given, the gift begins to be annulled. Jacques Derrida's advice is performative: in the face of this “aporia,” he tells us to “give,” all the while knowing and appreciating the traps that lie hidden in giving. Know how giving annuls itself, but nonetheless give, take the leap of faith in the gift and give, madly as it were, against all knowledge, in a moment of giving that tears up the circle of the economy.

That aporia is the main interest of Derrida's analysis of the gift, but there is a second aporia that his analysis also uncovers, which is of no less interest to us here. This time the accent in the aporia falls not on the side of the gift itself but on the side of the economy, which shows up in the second piece of advice Derrida gives us, complementary to the first, which is to “give economy a chance.” This is a typically multivalent expression, which means first of all, do not simply dismiss the idea of an economy as the work of an evil demon, but “give it a break,” as we would say in English. After all, the economy is what is all around us and in a certain sense it is really the only thing that exists, while the gift does not quite exist but tries to “insist” in the midst of what exists, where it is all but overwhelmed, nearly invisible, nearly

nothing at all, like a ghost. But Derrida also means this in a much more literal sense, to let the element of “chance” gain admittance to the economy, to inject a chance into the veins of the economy, to let the economy be disturbed by the chance of the gift, or by the gift of chance, to admit the chance of what he calls the “event,” the incoming of the event. So the “gift” is like an inexistent but insistent spirit, like a specter that haunts the wheels and pulleys and clanking gears of the economy.

The gift is not given in exchange for something else; it is not part of a calculated *quid pro quo*. It is not required or necessary, not demanded or commanded. But by the same token, if the gift is withheld, the economy contracts into a monster and instead of providing the scene of the event, it will become a nightmare. If the economy is not breached by these moments that exceed the economy, the economy seizes up. If we remain absolutely within the law, the result will be the worst injustice and the law will be a monster. So not only is the pure gift impossible, but so also is a pure economy. Absent the gift, the school would be an impossible place to be. The innumerable, invisible, ghostly gifts the teachers make are all gratuitous, extra, in excess of the economy, yet they are all absolutely necessary. The gift must be given, yet it is not a gift if it is compelled, coerced, demanded. If you give me your help out of a sense of duty, it is not a gift and I might just as soon do without it. We ought to give a gift where there is no question of an “ought” or of “owing.” The gift is given without owing, without ought, without why. I hasten to add that this dynamic of the need for the gift does not merely apply one-sidedly to the teachers alone, that it applies across every sector of the system, from top to bottom. It applies no less to the top, to the administrative powers that run the school — I am not recommending a policy of exploiting the good will of teachers. Pedagogy without why does not mean teaching without pay and working for nothing. It applies no less to the students, who will not get by if all they want to do is get by. Here is the first hauntological situation: those of us who spend our lives in the school find ourselves situated between the gift and the economy. We lead haunted lives, charmed or haunted by a call that is too “weak” and spectral to be an imperative even as we must conduct the business-as-usual of the economy of the world.

THE EVENT

It is the “event” that produces this spectral effect. Ghosts are neither entirely present, which is why we do not believe in them, nor entirely absent, which is why we do. So the ghost is a kind of “pres/absence,” there but then again not there, the source of a general disturbance in the present. So if we think of education on a hauntological model, as visibly present yet also visibly disturbed, it is because, on the premise of a hauntology, it is haunted by the event. The event is the ghost in the machine (computers, overhead projectors, buildings, offices, contracts, etc.), a machine for producing events, if that were possible. The spectral effect of the school is to leave students disturbed and provoked, believing in ghosts they never believed possible, never imagined were real. By the time we are done with them, they will never be the same. Their lives will be destabilized; they will have lost their equilibrium. They will see ghosts everywhere. Everywhere questions, suspicions, longings, doubts, dreams, wonders, puzzles where peace once reigned. Nothing will

be simple anymore. They will never have any rest. We have come to bring the hauntological sword, not the peace of presence. So it is of central importance to clarify what I mean by the event and its spectral qualities.

To be sure, in saying all this, I am not recommending we produce a pathological result. I mean to invoke the spookiness of the event as a way to disturb the settled tranquility of thinking we have nothing new to learn. The spirits that visit young children, who are still in the process of gaining a sense of self-confidence and security, should be cheery sprites. We mean to fill their heads with possibilities, not with fears in the night. By the time we see them in college, we expect students secure enough to question anything, knowing full well that it is the insecure who are afraid to question.

Let us begin by saying that the event, like any ghost worthy of the name, is not what visibly happens but what is going on invisibly in what visibly happens.³ It is not what is palpably present, but a restlessness with the present, an uneasiness within the present. Something disturbs the present but we do not know what it is — that is the event. Something is “coming” (*venire*) to get us but we do not know what. What is that if not a ghost?

The event is not what we desire but something haunting our desire.⁴ The event is not what we desire but what is being desired in what we desire, some deeper disturbance of our desire. When we desire this or that, we have the uneasy feeling that something else is getting itself desired in that desire, like a desire beyond desire. In this sense we can never say what we desire. We do not know what we desire. Still, this is not some fault or limitation in us, a failure on our part to know what we are doing. It is the very structure of the event, of temporality, of the openness of the future, of the ghost of the future.

As you cannot see a ghost, the event is structurally unforeseeable, the coming of what we cannot see coming, not because we are shortsighted but because of spectral structure of the future, of temporality of the event. There is of course a future that we can see coming and provide for, the future of our children or our retirement, which Derrida calls the “future-present.” But the event concerns the “absolute” future, the future for which we cannot plan, a future beyond the future, that visits us like a thief in the night, that haunts us in the night. Faced with what we cannot “see coming” (*voir venir*) we do no more than to try to discern its indiscernible demands, as if we were Jacob wrestling through the night with an angel. Vis-à-vis an “absolute” future we are asked to take a risk, to say “Come — and let’s see what comes” (*voir venir*).⁵

Over and beyond our completely reasonable expectation of what is possible, over and beyond the sane, visible economies of the world, the event arrives like the possibility of the impossible, of the unforeseeable, of some invisible spirit in which we did not previously believe. The coming of the event is the coming of the impossible.⁶ When we are visited by the event it seems as if the impossible has just happened, as if the impossible were possible after all. Is this magic, a miracle? Is this place haunted?

The present is made an unstable, uneasy place, shaken and disturbed by invisible forces, and this is because it contains something with which it cannot come to grips, something uncontainable. That is the event, which is contained in what happens but cannot be contained by what happens. The present contains what it cannot contain.

The event is like a ghost whispering in our ear, making promises, like the visitation by some spirit that pretends to know the future. The event is not what happens but what is being promised in and by what happens, enticing us to live on promises. By the same token, if what is being promised belongs to an absolute and unforeseeable future, then this promise comes without guarantees and nothing protects the promise from the threat of the worst. Not every angel is good; not every spirit can be trusted. Every promise is a risk.

But who or what is “making” this promise? If I knew that, Derrida says, I would know everything. He means he would be able to identify the ghost, make it entirely visible and present. The event is not something I do, or something we do, not anything that is being done by someone or something. Do not separate the doer from the deed, Friedrich Nietzsche says. There is no agent of the event, no active agency that brings it about, which means that the event is carried out in the middle voice. In virtue of some mysterious spectral operation, something is getting itself desired in and through and beyond our concrete and particular desires; something is getting itself promised in the particular promises that are all around us. If we could say who or what is making this promise, then the promise would not be the event, and it would not be a risk, for we would know someone real and substantive stands behind the promise, something backs it up. We would have driven out all the specters, exorcized one ghost too many. When Derrida says “give,” abruptly shifting from the aporia of the gift into the performative order, we ask, who is speaking here? Who calls for giving? Who has the authority to make such a call? This call, which is not a command or a direct order, has a certain force, but it is perforce a spectral force, a weak and unforced force, with no army to enforce it. It does not have the force of law but only the weakness of a plea for justice.⁷ Is this the voice of some spirit that somehow and invisibly manages to make itself felt? If we could identify the source, the call would cease to be a call. It would have the force of God or nature, of some super-presence instead of a spectral semi-presence, which we would be compelled to obey under penalty of disobeying God or defying nature. In order to protect the weak, fragile, and uncoercive character of the call, the origin of the call, *s'il y en a*, must be spooky, spectral, and indeterminate. “*Es spükt*,” it spooks, something spooks, something spooky is going on.⁸ All that we can say is that this call is made in the “middle voice,” without being able to identify an active agent calling. Something is getting itself said and called in a word like “gift” — and how many other words are there like that, words of an elementary but weak force? Some unknown spirit, something, *je ne sais quoi*, comes over us and asks something of us, asks for our faith, asks us to pledge our troth, without pretending to be a law of God or nature. Or perhaps precisely by “pretending” to be God or nature, but even so something is happening in this pretense.

Like any ghost, holy or not, the event does not exist; it insists. The event is not an agent, nor an existing visible thing, neither a who nor a what to be thanked or blamed. It is not some identifiable person or object, not “God” or “Being” or “History,” not the “People” or the “Party” or the “Spirit,” not the “unconscious” or “economics” or the “will-to-power.” The event insists in and within what exists, prying open what exists in the name of something unnamable, unforeseeable, a promise/risk beyond our imagining.

The event (*événement*) in the broadest possible sense is the specter of the future (*avenir*), meaning what is to-come (*à venir*).⁹ The event is the to-come itself, if there were such a thing, which there is not, since the event is not a visible palpable thing, not what happens, but what is going on invisibly in what happens. Deconstruction is situated at the point of exposure of the present to the to-come, precisely when the present feels the pressure of the “to come,” which is an infinite or infinitival pressure. The present is thereby pushed to its breaking point, where what happens bursts open under the pressure of what is coming. This burst, this deconstruction, this auto-deconstruction is not destruction. To deconstruct is to unsettle and de-sediment, to disturb and haunt, but it is not to smash to smithereens. Quite the opposite, it restores to things the future from which they were blocked by the present. The event insinuates itself into and unsettles what seems settled, insists within what exists. But the force of the “to-come” is a “weak force,” like a spirit speaking in the middle voice. There is no identifiable agent behind it, no Big Other, as Slavoj Žižek would say. It has no police, no army to back it up.

One of Derrida’s favorite examples of an event, which is not simply an example, but something close to its heart, is “democracy,” a spectral shape which never is what it is, is never what is present.¹⁰ At any given moment, no existing democracy can respond to what we call for when we call (for) “democracy,” even as we never adequately respond to what democracy calls for. Democracy is always and structurally coming, always to-come. Democracy is the event that is being promised in the word democracy, what insists in this word, what calls to us before we call for it, what addresses us, haunts us day and night. “Democracy” is a call, not a state of affairs, an infinitival weak imperative, not a sturdy noun or stable nominative.

TEACHING THE EVENT

How can we bring about the event? The very attempt to bring about the event would prevent the event. It breaks in upon us unforeseen, uninvited. Still, there is a certain conjuring of the event, a certain dark art of requesting an apparition. It is possible, Derrida says, to be inventive about the eventive, playing on the old sense of both the Latin “*inventio*” and the French “*invention*,” both to invent and to discover or come upon. We must be inventive in order to allow its in-coming (*in-venire*).¹¹ That means getting over a fear of ghosts, being willing to live with strange noises in the night, being hospitable to spooks. It means conjuring the spirits that keep the system open to the event, that keep the system in play, embracing the spooky effects of a quasi-transcendental disequilibrium, living in an elusive state of instability, in a word, a magnificent word coined by James Joyce, “chaosmic,” meaning a state that is neither chaos nor cosmos. Either pure order or pure disorder

would prevent the event. When Derrida calls this “deconstruction,” he invites the misunderstanding of radical chaos, implying that he is out to raze institutions instead of merely meaning to spook them. He is not recommending pure anarchy or a libertarian anti-institutionalism; he has in mind a positive idea of institutions as a scene of the event. Deconstruction is all about institutions — schools, hospitals, political bodies, courts, museums — and how to keep them in creative disequilibrium without tipping over, how to spook their complacency with the promise/risk of the future. What is truly destructive is the opposite of the event, which is the absolute exorcism of the event by the “program,” absolute foreseeability, deducibility, rule-governed activity. When the “program” is in place, what happens is a function of the laws of the system, of a rigorous logic, not of the aphoristic, metaphoristic, grammatological energy of the event. The only possible program is to program the unprogrammable, the unforeseeable. Otherwise the ghost or spirit of the event will have fled the premises.

All the aporias surrounding justice and democracy, education and the gift, are problems of the event. All the problems of teaching, of what Gert Biesta calls “subjectification,”¹² are aporias of the event, of becoming a subject of the event, of responding to the call of the event — ever since Socrates tried to figure out a way to make students (the patients) the agent of their own instruction, to figure out how students could come to see for themselves, to be struck by the event, instead of simply being stung by Socrates; ever since Søren Kierkegaard tried to get existing individuals to assume responsibility for themselves, without being responsible to Kierkegaard. The teacher must somehow allow the event to happen without standing between the student and the event, without attempting to manipulate the event. The teacher must figure out how to be a weak force, how the middle voice works, how to be an agent without agency, a provocateur who is not an agent, how to engage the spooky dynamics of a haunting spirit.

What is the spectral effect that takes place in teaching? According to the hauntological principle, we should say the event in education is not what happens but what is going on in what happens. What happens is teaching, the schools, but something is going on in what happens, something desired with a desire beyond desire, something unforeseeable, something impossible, uncontainable, something coming in and as an absolute future. When this or that is taught, that is what is happening, but the event is what is going on in what happens, which we cannot get our hands on, cannot master or manipulate, cannot make happen, but only conjure up. The event is a matter of “indirect” communication, Kierkegaard would say; the teacher is only a midwife of the event, Socrates would say. Teaching does not directly handle the event. It deals directly with the various disciplines, the fields of study, more or less standard-form, academic operations. But all along, running quietly in the background, is the event. Teaching takes place under the impulse of the event, letting the event be in the teaching, letting it into the teaching, letting the event by which the teacher is touched touch the student, so that both the teacher and the student are touched by a common event. But the event belongs to an absolute future that no one sees coming, over which neither teacher nor student has disposal,

what neither one knows or foresees or commands, where we do our best in an impossible situation to see what is possible, to “see what comes.” It is the invisible, unidentifiable, undetectable operations of the event that have assembled teacher and student together, placed them in the same room, both in the service of the event, *me voici*, in the accusative, in response to the event, in answer to the fetching call of some unknown spirit.

Contrary to the received opinion, there are no masters in the school. The teacher then is variously the effect of the event, the caretaker of the event, its *souffleur*, its conjurer, but not its master. The student comes under the spell of the event, is spooked by its uncanny operations, is unaware that some spectral force is afoot in these halls. The school must be the space in which the event is possible, the scene in which every possible scenario of the event, of all the events, imaginable and unimaginable, might take place. To define teaching by the event is to situate the teacher at the point where the present is spooked by the future, trembles with the specter of the to-come. Teaching occupies the cracks and crevices in the present where the present is broken open by some coming spirit. The students are the future, the future we do not see, either because we never see them again, or because they are the future generations which outlive us, so that whatever gifts we have given are given to a future in which we will never be present, an absolutely spectral future in which we will be but shades.

But if education is what happens, what is the event that is going on? If it is a spook, does the spook have a name? Which spook do I have in mind? Education is one of the openings of the event, one of its thresholds, one of the places the event take place. But what is the event of education (if there is one)? There is of course no one event, no event of all events, for that would lead to terror. Events disseminate, spread rhizomatically, by contamination, intimation, indirection, association, suggestion, by chance. Otherwise we would reinstate the old theology of sovereignty, the old top down onto-theological order, the metaphysics of the program, of mastery, of which the omnipotence of the good old God would be the paradigm — the old order of the king, of the father, of the master, to which the “school-master” belongs. Were we to allow a theology into this scene, it would not turn on the sovereignty of God but on the chance for grace, for the event of grace, for the grace of the event, for which the classroom attempts to provide the scene.

Still, what is the distinctive call or address that takes place in the school, the spirit that haunts the halls of the school? To think the event that takes place in the schools — which is, I am proposing, to undertake what this association calls the “philosophy of education” — is to ask what is promising, what is being promised in the middle voice by the “school,” where the school joins the list of words of elementary promise, words that tremble with the quiet power of the promise, the quiet power of the possible. What is getting itself promised in “education,” the “university,” the “school?” What spirit is calling to us in what we call a “school,” a “university,” a “teacher,” a “professor?” Whoever enters the spectral space of the school is answering a call, responding to some spirit calling us together here in

common cause. What calls? What does it call for? Who is being called upon? To what future does it call us forth?

If I were throw all caution to the winds, to attempt in an act of sheer folly to condense the event of which the school provides the scene, to name this spook, I would say the school is the place where, in an effort to let the event happen, we reserve the right to ask any question. The school is mobilized by a spirit calling — give, ask, question, open up, risk — to put anything and everything in question, even and especially very sacrosanct things like “God” or “democracy,” or what we mean by “reason,”¹³ “knowledge,” “truth,” which are among our most intimidating, risky, and promising words. It may well be the case, for example, that what is being promised in the word “democracy” will come at the cost of the word democracy, which may finally prove itself to be an obstacle, a way to prevent the event. For after all, if the “democracy to come” is unforeseeable, how do we know it will still be a “democracy?” When he was once asked this very question, Derrida responded that, in the expression “the democracy to come,” the “to-come” is more important than the “democracy.”¹⁴ So then the school will be the place that puts democracy into question, in the very name of what democracy promises. The school is the assembly of those who answer the imperative or the call of the school — dare to ask, to question, to think, dare to know, dare to teach and dare to learn, dare to put what we think we know at risk, dare the event to happen. The right to ask any question does not mean that any question is a good question; this right includes the right put the question in question, to sort out good questions from bad.

What I am saying at this point is conjuring up the old and venerable spirit that inspired the Enlightenment, *sapere aude*, dare to know, but I am saying it in the spirit of a new enlightenment, which is enlightened about any (capitalized) Enlightenment, which understands that there are many lights and that enlightenments come in many versions. This new enlightenment is not afraid of the dark; indeed it begins with the recognition that the absolute future is in the dark. This new enlightenment is not afraid of the ghosts that the old Enlightenment tried to exorcise. It understands that there are other things than light, that the event is not only a matter of light. So in saying “the right to ask any question” I am not proposing a one-sidedly cognitive ideal, emphasizing the light of the idea. The event is not only cognitive light and not primarily something cognitive. I have said the event is something that I desire with a desire beyond desire, so that the event has an erotic force; and I have said that it calls and solicits me, so that it has a “vocational” force, provoking me, evoking my response, transforming my life. The general effect of specters is to inspire, for better or for worse.

The teacher has to play the delicate role of conjurer, of indirectly calling up an elusive spirit, of letting the event be, and that is because to learn is to be struck by the event. To teach is to teach by way of the event, to let the event touch the student. Teaching is haunting, subtly intimating that there are spectral forces afoot. That involves conceding the common exposure of the teacher and the student to the event, that there are unknown specters all around, and that we share a common situation of

non-knowing and mortality and open-endedness. To teach is to ask a question to which one truly does not know the answer, because no one knows, and to make the answers we all think we know questionable. To teach is to expose our common exposure to the specter of the secret. To learn is to unlearn what we think we know and to expose ourselves to the unknowable. Teaching and learning alike are a matter of allowing ourselves to be spooked.

The aporia of the school is to have administrators who do not produce administered institutions and to conduct “programs” that do not program the school, that do not bind and coerce the event. That means the program must be in-ventive, which means that it let something break in, so that in the end no one, neither the planners nor the implementers of the program, can know exactly where it will lead. It means no one is afraid of the risk. The program is not meant to program. It must be inventive in the double sense: as carefully planned as possible, but also designed to inject the system with chance, to allow entry to the aleatory spirits and the spooks that haunt the system, to “see what comes,” so that the “program” is “designed” to deal with a future that we cannot design. The school is a place of uncanny and unnerving instability, preserving a space of openness, a readiness for the future, pushing forward into an unknown future. All its ideas and ideals are all spooks, both shadowy specters of the past and faint images of an unforeseeable future. In the school, things are placed and displaced, posed and deposed, venerated but also innovated, respected but also subjected to the infinite, infinitival pressure of the to-come. Whatever has been constructed is deconstructible, and whatever is deconstructible is deconstructible in the name of what is not deconstructible, and what is not deconstructible is a spook, a specter, neither present nor absent, a promise, still to come, the to-come itself, the absolute future — of the school, of the teacher, of the student, of us all, of the earth.

All of the aphoristic and even anarchic energies of deconstruction, all its impishness and seeming impudence, which seem mistakenly to some as sheer relativism, are like angels tending to the arrival of some unknown event while displacing the forces that would prevent the event. This does not pit deconstruction against systems, institutions, orders, in short, against economies of one kind or another, which are after all the only thing that exists. But we are here today because we are not satisfied with what exists and because we are haunted by what insists. Deconstruction is a style of displacement, a way of haunting these systems by inhabiting them from within, keeping all the inhabitants slightly off balance, in a state of optimal unease and disquiet, which lets events happen. The event is what allows invention, inventiveness, and reinventability, effecting a well-tempered dis/order. The event is the resistance offered to a closed system, to a program, meaning everything run by rules so that nothing is unruly and there are no surprises. The love of order in the end is too powerful, too overwhelming, and it must be resisted by the order of love.

This hauntological operation is repeated every time a deconstructive analysis is undertaken. The “gift” is what disturbs the economy and prevents it from devolving into a *quid pro quo* system of exchange. “Justice” is what haunts the law, keeping

it appealable and repealable, without which the law would be a monster. “Forgiveness” is what keeps the moral order from descending into a closed cycle of retribution. “Hospitality” is what keeps the system of privacy and property from shutting out the stranger, the figure of which, for Emmanuel Levinas, is the door that both closes and opens. In every case the event haunts the system with the specter of its future, which also means to assume the risk of having a genuine future, which is a real risk. Nothing says this will not have been an evil spirit, that the event will not be a disaster, that we will not in our attempt to reinvent ourselves expose ourselves to the wolves of the worst evils. The rules are a way to play it safe, but if the rules overrule the event, then to play is safe is to risk the loss of the event. Safety is dangerous; everything is dangerous.

Accordingly, I reimagine my haunting spirit not as an omnipotent God but as a weak force, a quiet call, an invitation, a solicitation.¹⁵ This God is not a “necessary being” but a “maybe,” a “perhaps,” whose “might” is the subjunctive might of the might-be it whispers in my ear. Perhaps the name of the event that takes place in teaching, the name of the spirit that haunts everything that is going on in teaching, is nothing more or less than the spectral workings of “perhaps.” Perhaps we require a pedagogy of weakness, of the “weakness of the school,” of the university, as the place whose suppleness and plasticity allows the event to take place, allows the promise, the “perhaps” to take place. Perhaps the very idea of the event is this “perhaps,” to expose ourselves, teachers and students alike, to the quiet power of “perhaps,” the weak force of “perhaps” that steals over unawares everything that passes itself off as “present.” Perhaps, the event that takes place in the school is to let the subtle and oblique energies of the “perhaps,” of possibilities hitherto unimagined, slip in like a fog and make everything tremble with a future we cannot see coming. Perhaps, the ghost that scares us the most is the soft voice of “perhaps.”

CONCLUSION

When teachers threaten to “work the contract,” they engage in a hauntological exercise. They are trying to spook the world by holding up a mirror to the world so that it can be frightened by its own image and see the meanness of its ways. Moved by the better angels of their nature, they are saying: imagine a world in which we have suspended the gift, prevented the event, banished all the invisible spirits that haunt the halls. They spook the world with a vision of what it would be like if the world were all in all, a rigid system of exchange, with no gaps, no breaks, or openings; no ghostly apparitions of something coming, no obscure spirits, no promises, no gift, no grace, and no chance of the event. They are reminding the economy of the world, its institutional forces, that without the gift the world would be a nightmare. The doors of the institution would still be open for business, the computers, the printers, the overhead projectors would still be there, but the spirits that haunt its halls would have fled. The school would have been absorbed into the *quid pro quo* sanity of the world. The position of the teachers is strategic, an “as if,” a “perhaps,” here in the form of a perhaps not, like Bartleby’s preferring not to. They have been driven to the extreme, forced to act as if there is no event. They are saying, if you want absolutely balanced books not the gift, if you want an ontology not an hauntology, if you want

to banish all the ghosts, this is what the world would look like: no events, no “perhaps,” no future, nothing coming.

1. The leitmotif of “hauntology” used in this essay is taken from Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 10. For a further and very helpful elaboration of the thematic of the specter in education, see Claudia Ruitenberg, “Education as Séance: Specters, Spirits and the Expansion of Memory,” *Interchange* 40, no. 3 (2009): 295–308.

2. See Jacques Derrida, *Given Time, I: Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), ch. 1 for a splendid presentation of this aporia.

3. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 149.

4. Derrida, *Given Time*, 30.

5. This Derridean motif is deployed with aplomb in Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, trans. Lisabeth During (New York: Routledge, 2005).

6. Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, vol. 1, trans. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 43–47.

7. Jacques Derrida, “The Force of Law: ‘The Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” trans. Mary Quantance, in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michael Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3–69.

8. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 172; this general hauntological effect of “*es spricht*” bears an uncanny resemblance to the general effect of Heidegger’s “*es gibt*.”

9. Permit me to refer to my “Temporal Transcendence: The Very Idea of *à venir* in Derrida,” in *Transcendence and Beyond*, eds. John D. Caputo and Michael Scanlon (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007).

10. Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); Derrida had the kindness to refer to my “Temporal Transcendence” in *Rogues*, 37.

11. This double sense of invention is explored by Derrida throughout *Psyche*, ch.1

12. Gert Biesta, “The Weakness of Education: For a Pedagogy of the Event,” paper presented at the 2009 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 13–17, San Diego, CA.

13. Jacques Derrida, “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils,” in *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2*, trans. Jan Plug et al. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 129–155.

14. Jacques Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971–2001*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 182.

15. As Gert Biesta says, “But if subjectivity is an event, something that occurs in a domain ‘otherwise than being,’ then it follows that strong education has no role to play here because in a very literal sense it cannot ‘reach’ the event of subjectivity. In relation to subjectification, to the event of subjectivity, there is nothing for education to produce. This is why in relation to subjectification we need an idea of the weakness of education and of education as a weak, existential force, not a strong metaphysical one.” Biesta kindly makes an adroit adaptation of my *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

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