

At This Very Moment In This Theatre Here I Am

It's very good to be here.

I'm sorry I can't be here.

Thank you for letting me be here.

At this very moment, I am sitting here, in my seat, full of expectation. I'm always like that, before, you know, the curtain goes up.

Are you full of expectation? Are you expectant at this very moment? I expect not. Not so much.

I'm Dan. Hi.

I'm Ruth. Hi.

I'm in the Centre for Creative Collaboration and I'm in the Barbican stalls, seat A31, waiting for Richard II to start. Which is why I can't deliver the paper that I wanted to give and why I've been asked to deliver it which, at this very moment, I am doing, I hope faithfully, or as faithful as it is possible to be to this writing, which is, probably, not very faithful at all.

BLAH
BLAH
BLAH
BLAH!
BLAH

We've all been asked to choose a text by Jacques Derrida and the text that I have chosen is an essay from 1980 that discusses the thinking of Emmanuel Levinas, focusing particularly on Levinas's book Otherwise Than Being published in 1974. Derrida's essay is titled 'At This Very Moment In This Work Here I Am'.

What is Derrida doing in this essay? He is doing many things. He is trying to be faithful to Levinas. As many

of you will know, Levinas proposed that ethics precedes ontology. Put more plainly, when we encounter the Other, we do not confront the Other with our selfhood already intact; it is by encountering the Other ~~then~~^{that} we come closest to becoming ourselves. This is ethics, because it is our sense of obligation to the Other ~~when~~^{that} we encounter immediately, and this ethical demand is what calls our own being, our ontology, into being.

This has an important impact on our autonomy. We are brought into being by the Other; the Other brings us about. The borders of our selves are breached and overflow into one another. And because the Other is wholly Other, there is an unbreachable gap between me and the Other that opens us all up to infinity. 'There is a claim laid on the Same by the Other in the core of myself,' says Derrida, quoting Levinas (p. 151). I carry an obligation to you in the heart of me.

I am obliged to you.

Thank you for letting me be here.

I owe you one.

This marks a temporal interruption also. The orderly sequence where I meet you is reversed, since it is only in meeting you that I come to be at all. These paradoxes are marked by Derrida who notes Levinas's frequent use of the phrase 'at this very moment'. Which moment? Is the Levinasian moment^{as} the same as the Derridean moment? Which very moment came first? An interval opens up in the singular moment, an interval in which one might get a glimpse of our infinite obligations, or an interval in which you might get a glass of dry white wine.

↓
(I'm not sure why he felt the need to say that...)

How must we read Levinas? What are our obligations to these texts? The text does not precede its encounter with the reader, says Derrida, channelling Levinas. It is not fully-formed, awaiting the reader simply to experience its plenitude. The text comes into being in the encounter with the Reader-Other.

Neither is the reader ready to read. You can never be completely ready to read because your readership does not precede the encounter with what you read. This, at least, seems to be the implication of Levinasian ethics for the act of reading.

But this raises a paradox: it suggests we can know what the book is telling us to do before we've read it. If the book contains instructions on how to read it, how do we know how to read the instructions?

To read Levinas faithfully, one must be unfaithful to him. Derrida exploits a playful slippage between the French words for 'must', 'false', and 'fault': faut, faux, and faute, as if the words are already telling us that our obligations to Levinas will betray him.

One must allow oneself - and Derrida allows himself - to discover oneself in the encounter with the text; and the text must be allowed to come into being in an encounter with the reader. And the text will change shape; it will shift and shimmer; it will not be the same here as it is here.

(here as it is here)

From where I'm sitting - seriously, £55, I mean I know he played Doctor Who and so he's a big star but seriously, £55?? - from my stalls seat, at this very moment, Levinas

can seem absurd. How can one encounter the Other at all without a self to do the encountering? How can an obligation form in someone if the obligation also brings that person about at the same moment, at the very same moment?

But like Richard II, who meets Bolingbroke and sees that Bolingbroke is not on his knees and only when he encounters this Other realises who is, that he is no longer King, maybe this happens.

(the paper) (I'm not sure this paragraph makes sense...)

Ethics precedes ontology when, for instance, a writer asks an actor to read a paper and the actor generously agrees and then the paper comes into existence.

Because imagine this paper unperformed? It's unperformed right now but it gestures towards the Other.

✦ [Hi Ruth. I'm waving. Can you see me?] ✦

The writer gives a text to an actor, but the actor's agreement is what brings that text into being. The actor's agreement precedes the text.

Language de-forms in these transactions. The distinction beloved of speech-act theorists between speaking and quoting, between use and mention, breaks down. An actor is not quoting a writer when they perform the words; an actor can quote a writer ('you'll never believe what that prick said to me yesterday') but when they perform the words, they are not using them or mentioning them, but something in between.

But let's not think that the actor completes the text, opens it to the plenitude of performance. A performance is the opposite of plenitude: it's fleeting, imperfect and different. Maybe I should say it is permanently fleeting, wholly imperfect, and uniformly different. The transaction between writer and actor meanwhile is open to the infinite. Because the text is always open to the Other. The play is never completed by the actor - there's always other ways of doing it - just as the actor is never completed by the play - there's always other roles.

A writer leaves a trace, but as Derrida says, and I quote and I quote, 'leaving a trace is also to leave it, to abandon it' (p. 176). The writer and the actor overlap briefly but betray each other in numerous productive ways.

(Surprise - why's Dan here again?!)

- * - Hi Ruth.
- Hello Dan.
- I'm very grateful to you.
- Hey no, I'm very grateful to you.
- How's the paper going?
- It's a bit hard-going to be honest. There are some bored faces round the table.
- That's okay, I expected that.
- Can I be honest? I think the exposition of Levinas earlier was both a bit too simplistic and a bit too dense.
- Oh gee, thanks for saying that in front of everybody.
- I thought you'd appreciate my honesty.
- At the very moment, I feel like a bit of a tool.

* In the second half of the essay, Derrida challenges Levinas for his marginalisation of sexual difference. For

Levinas, the Other is sexually unmarked, yet Derrida suggests that if sexual difference is excluded from the characterisation of the Other, if it is expelled from the circle of the Other, then it must be a kind of "Other of the Other." And, in Levinasian terms, being is formed by the encounter with the Other and so sexual difference must therefore be constitutive of the Other and cannot be expelled at all.

repeat

'I am speaking from my place as a woman,' says Derrida (p. 185).

I am speaking from my place in the stalls.

I am a woman.

This seductive argument of Derrida's unravels the whole of Levinasian ethics, though. Does anything not characterise the Other? Any attempt to exclude some feature from our characterisation of the Other will fail because then we Other the Other. Can we say the Other is not made of biscuits? No, because then it would seem that the Other is constituted by biscuits, opened infinitely to biscuits, carries biscuits in its core.

I would like Derrida to stay theatrical...

(because...)

What theatre - and the mutual betrayal of stage and play - shows us is that we can retain ethical consideration for the most vanishingly small quantum of personhood.

Take Richard II. In the great deposition scene, the scene in which Richard is forced to surrender his crown, Richard wants to see what he looks like now that he has been deprived of his rule. He asks for a mirror. My Oxford edition offers this stage direction:

'Exit an attendant' (4.1.268.1)

Who is this attendant? The beginning of the scene announces:

'Enter as to the Parliament Bolingbroke, Aumerle, Northumberland, Percy, Fitzwater, Surrey, Carlisle, Abbot of Westminster, Herald, Officers and Bagot' (4.1.0)

In other words, there are no attendants in attendance. Looking further through the scene, York and Richard enter, but still no attendants.

So this attendant is brought into being at the moment of his or her vanishing, appears in and only in the very act of disappearing. At that very moment, their function is announced and annulled. That the attendant does not attend is what announces the attendant, and note: because he or she has been given an obligation. Ethics precedes ontology.

The attendant is like an actor who dies but you know will come back on for the curtain call. Their departure is what will demand their return.

'Exit an attendant' is about as minimal an indication of personhood as you can give. Perhaps only 'Exit a person' would bring us more directly up to the very essence of the ethical encounter, the simplest obligation of the barest Other?

In fact, Shakespeare seems to have given us less. 'Exit the attendant' is an early eighteenth-century addition.

Shakespeare tells us that the attendant returns ('Enter one with a glass' [4.1.275.1]) but not that they go. Bolingbroke tells them to go. In fact, Bolingbroke says 'Go some of you and fetch a looking-glass' (4.1.268), until presumably the attendants decide that going to get a looking-glass is a one-person job. Though, by opening us up to the infinite, the finitude of the self is ruptured and may multiply the selves just as 'sorrow's eye, glazed with blinding tears / Divides one thing entire to many objects' (2.2.16-17).

The loss of the attendant is what opens us up to the person.

'Exit an attendant' is a simple stage direction, yet it is also impossible. It is impossible to stage the bareness of that injunction. An actor always intervenes, marks the attendant with height, skin, sexual difference. The play is always inadequate to the stage and overflows it; the stage always betrays and amplifies the play. The stage to the play and the play to the stage is like the Duke of York: it is 'my sour husband, my hard-hearted lord / That sets the word itself against the word' (5.3.120-1).

✶ (Thank you, Ruth, for giving me this paper.)

And now exit an actor.