

“At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am:”

A text written by Jacques Derrida for Emmanuel Levinas?

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## Abbreviations

Page numbers in the text refer first to the English translation, then to the original French. Full bibliographical details can be found in the Bibliography.

### Works by Jacques Derrida

- ATVM    At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am / En ce moment même dans cet ouvrage me voici
- VM        Violence and Metaphysics / L'écriture et la différence

### Works by Emmanuel Levinas

- JFE        Judaism and the Feminine Element / *Le judaïsme et le féminin*
- NG        The Name of God According to a Few Talmudic Texts / Le nom de Dieu d'après quelques textes talmudiques
- OB        *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence / Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*
- TI        *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority / Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l'extériorité*

## Introduction

Our crossing of paths is already very good, and it is probably the very modality of the philosophical encounter. In emphasizing the primordial importance of the questions raised by Derrida, I have desired to express the pleasure of a contact at the heart of a chiasmus.

- Emmanuel Levinas on Jacques Derrida.<sup>1</sup>

Faced with a thinking like that of Levinas, I never have an objection. I am ready to subscribe to everything that he says.

- Jacques Derrida, interview.<sup>2</sup>

Derrida's encounters with his contemporary philosophers have not been without controversy.<sup>3</sup> He has often been accused of being purposefully misleading, evasive, or outright hostile in approaching his interlocutors. The comments that Levinas and Derrida made about each other above suggest that nothing of the sort can be said about their famous relationship.<sup>4</sup> It is indeed safe to say that Derrida is one of Levinas's most loyal and thorough readers, while it is well known that he is greatly indebted to him for the development of his own thought as well.<sup>5</sup> In like manner, it is generally acknowledged that Levinas rose to fame as a philosopher in large part thanks to Derrida's influential commentaries of his works.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From "Wholly Otherwise," in Levinas, *Proper Names*, 62.

<sup>2</sup> From *Altérités*, an interview conducted with Derrida in 1986, quoted in Critchley, *Ethics of Deconstruction*, 9-10.

<sup>3</sup> One can think for example of Derrida's infamous debate with Searle over Austin's speech act theory; the exchanges with Foucault, which ended their relationship; his initially strenuous relationship with Habermas; and his encounter with Gadamer in 1981.

<sup>4</sup> This does however not mean that they were not critical of one another. Derrida continues his answer in the interview in *Altérités* as follows: "That does not mean that I think the same thing in the same way, but in this respect the differences are very difficult to determine; in this case, what do differences of idiom, language or writing mean? I tried to pose a certain number of questions to Levinas whilst reading him, where it may have seen a question of his relation to Greek Logos, of his strategy or of his thinking with femininity for example, but what happens there is not of the order of disagreement (see footnote 2)."

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Bernasconi, "The Trace of Levinas in Derrida."

<sup>6</sup> Lescourret, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 280.

From a philosophical perspective, the fortuitous relationship between Levinas and Derrida is remarkable, especially if we consider that both were averse to what might be called “successful” or “proper” exchange within a community of philosophers. Despite their close proximity, the form that their interaction did not take is what Levinas at some point describes as “the discourse that men facing each other hold between them, summoning one another and exchanging statements and objections, questions and answers.”<sup>7</sup> Or, in the words of Derrida, “communication in discursive form, colloquial, oral communications destined to be understood and to open or pursue dialogues within the horizon of an intelligibility and truth of meaning, such that in principle a general agreement may finally be established.”<sup>8</sup>

For Levinas the experience that one cannot fully communicate one’s thoughts to the other is integral to writing a philosophical work. He famously said that the relationship with the other is always “at the risk of misunderstanding [*malentendu*]..., at the risk of lack of [*faute*] and refusal of communication” (OB: 120/190). He also said that it is “a fine risk to run” (OB: 120/190), and “a fine risk is always something to be taken in philosophy” (OB: 20/38). Far from sanctioning intentional ill will or animosity in conversation, acknowledging the irreducibility of this risk is Levinas’s way of ensuring that philosophy stays turned in a responsible way toward the Other as infinitely other. Facing the other, Levinas says, I am always “wanting and faulty” [*fautif*], always at the risk of speaking to and for what is never present but always absent, forsaken, abandoned, lost, possibly nothingness (OB: 91/145, 93-94/148-50).

Derrida has always been keen to hold this against him and to point out when and how he is threatened to be overcome by the very risks that he posits. Despite Levinas’s considerable effort to give the other an opportunity to respond and put him into question, Derrida shows that he often renders the other mute, deprived of language, and beyond the capacity to respond.<sup>9</sup> A recurring argument in his earlier commentaries is Levinas’s frequent failure to identify and reach

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<sup>7</sup> Levinas, *Of God who Comes to Mind*, 137.

<sup>8</sup> Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context,” 310.

<sup>9</sup> On the association of the Other with death and responselessness in Levinas, see Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 47-48; and “Adieu,” in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 1-13; On the lack of possibility to speak and respond of the animal other in Levinas, see *The Animal that Therefore I am*, 105-18. On the silence of the feminine in the works of Levinas, see section 3.2.

his interlocutors,<sup>10</sup> while in his later commentaries he shows that it is always possible that Levinas can become an unreachable interlocutor to others as well.<sup>11</sup>

That the language used by Levinas and Derrida to write their works is not of secondary importance is something that most commentators acknowledge. However, the focus usually is on how their idiosyncratic ways of using language allow them to successfully express themselves and communicate their complex thoughts to the other.<sup>12</sup> What is less well understood is how their respective viewpoints on the irreducible faultiness of communication fundamentally shaped the works that they wrote to one another. How can an exchange take place or a debate unfold if we accept as a necessary risk the failure to address or respond to the other? What must we expect from a dialogue between two philosophers that has as its starting point the possibility of miscommunication and misunderstanding?

There is, I believe, no better example of the risks involved in engaging with the works of Levinas as Derrida's "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am." First published in French in 1980 as "En ce moment même dans cet ouvrage me voice," this is Derrida's second commentary fully dedicated to the thought of Levinas, and is mostly a response to *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas's second major work, published six years prior. In the case of this text, it is strikingly the relation of Derrida as a silent interlocutor to Levinas that is being interrogated. One of its premises is Levinas's neglect to pay due to "Violence and Metaphysics," Derrida's influential first commentary on the early thought of Levinas. There is an almost complete lack of acknowledgment of Derrida's work in *Otherwise than Being*, even though the latter's influence on this work can clearly be felt. Derrida picked up on this presence/absence of himself in Levinas's

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<sup>10</sup> One of the implicit arguments in "Violence and Metaphysics" is that many of the philosophers with whom Levinas converges remain unmentioned (aside from Husserl and Heidegger), their silent voices resonating in his works. Derrida specifically points out Hegel ("who stands most accused in the trial conducted by this book" [VM: 104/125]), Kierkegaard (VM: 137-38/162-63), Feuerbach and Jaspers (VM: 139/164), and Kant (VM: 400-401n.26/142n.2).

<sup>11</sup> Derrida makes an interesting point of this when Levinas became silent and absent upon his death in 1995. This comes most strongly to the fore in the two texts that he wrote in commemoration of his friend's parting in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. Both of these texts deal with the struggle of having to engage an interlocutor who "will no longer respond" and "who keeps silent" (*Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 1-2).

<sup>12</sup> E.g. Llewelyn, *Appositions*, 176-78; Boer, *Rationality of Transcendence*, 67ff.; Dudiak, *Intrigue of Ethics*, chapter 7; Morgan, *Discovering Levinas*, chapter 10; Van der Heiden, "The Contaminated Wound."

work with this commentary whose title, as one scholar has suggested, could accordingly be read as: “*At this very moment of this reading in this, Levinas’s, work here I, Jacques Derrida, am.*”<sup>13</sup>

Far from holding it against him in spite, however, it would be better to say that the faults and miscommunications that Levinas risked in writing *Otherwise than Being* inspired and motivated Derrida to compose his response. *Otherwise than Being* gave him the chance, so to speak, to write “At This Very Moment,” which is an equally risky and faulty text. As he says early in this text:

So you are forewarned [*Te voila prévenue*]: it is the risk or chance of this fault that fascinates or obsesses me at this very moment, and what can happen [*devenir*] to a faulty writing, to a faulty letter (the one I write you), what can remain of it, what the ineluctable possibility of such a fault gives one to think about a text or a remainder. (ATVM: 147/163)

This thesis offers a close reading of “At This Very Moment in This Work Here I am.” I am of the opinion that this fascinating but widely ignored text deserves more attention than it has hitherto received. However, in approaching this text, I argue that we must not only ask how Levinas and Derrida speak and write to one another, but also how they do *not speak*, or fail or refuse to speak, or speak otherwise than is expected or required to speak. I therefore propose that we pay attention not only to what Derrida says to Levinas in this text, but also to what is otherwise than *said by Derrida to Levinas*—what is *not said, not by Derrida, and not to Levinas*. Making sense of this in all its registers is the charge of this thesis.

Let me note that my attention to nonresponse and miscommunication does not intent to be purely negative. I argue that it is common of Derrida’s strategy, not just in responding to Levinas, but to other philosophers as well, to find what is left unsaid in their works, and to interrogate what they neglect to speak about when they speak about something: premises that remain unchallenged, voices that are left out of the interrogation, questions that still await answers, etc. It is my contention that Derrida believes that silences, lapses, or faults like these, which are incorporated into the work and repeated in the commentaries, can displace a

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<sup>13</sup> Bernasconi, “Skepticism in the Face of Philosophy,” 155-59.



philosophical discourse from within and open it up to wholly different interpretations unforeseen in the internal structure of the work itself.<sup>14</sup>

My thesis will have the following structure. The first section will offer some background on the current state of secondary scholarship on “At This Very Moment.” I will also give an overview of where this text stands compared to other exchanges between Levinas and Derrida. The remaining sections will deal directly with the text itself. Since Derrida does not develop his argument systematically in a linear process, I have decided to go through the text multiple times, each time with a slightly different focus and reading different parts of the text. In the second section of this thesis, I will deal with the more technical side of Derrida’s text in examining his deliberations and struggles with formulating a response to *Otherwise than Being*. The third section deals with the important and controversial issue of sexual difference and the feminine in the works of Levinas and Derrida. I will examine their respective viewpoints on this topic and what unexpected role the feminine has to play in Derrida’s response to Levinas. This will be followed in the fourth section with another close reading of “At This Very Moment,” but this time with the focus on those passages where the faults in Derrida’s response to Levinas are most clearly at work and open the text up to multiple responses to come. One such response will be attempted in the conclusion.

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<sup>14</sup> Confluences with Derrida’s “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” an essay on negative theology, can help clarify this. In one of the text’s footnotes, Derrida comments that following the syntax of the title of Levinas’s book, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, this work leads to a response to the following question: “How to avoid speaking? How to avoid saying? Otherwise, and implicitly: How to avoid speaking—of being? How to speak being otherwise? How to speak otherwise (than) being? And so on” (“How to Avoid Speaking,” 306-307n.3). It is the connection between what must remain “not said” with what must be said and must be “otherwise said” (cf. *ibid.*, 153-54, 164-65) that I believe can lead to a positive analysis of “At This Very Moment” as well, and that this thesis attempts to explore.

# 1. Situating the text

## 1.1. The dominant interpretation

“At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am” is one of the most, if not the most, ignored text in the relationship between Levinas and Derrida. The general unwillingness of scholars to engage with this text might in part be explained by its opacity and its being very niche, while the dearth of scholarly response has helped little to lift it out of its obscurity. The most complete and detailed interpretation of “At This Very Moment” can be found in Simon Critchley’s widely influential *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, in a chapter called “‘Bois’—Derrida’s Final Word on Levinas.” A similar interpretation, with a slightly different emphasis, is Miriam Bankovsky’s “A Thread of Knots: Jacques Derrida’s Homage to Emmanuel Levinas’ Ethical Reminder.” Their readings are insightful, yet are also based on some mistaken assumptions. In the following, I will first identify these assumptions and explain why I think they are misleading. This will then be followed by my own approach.

The general tendency among scholars is to emphasize the “original” context in which “At This Very Moment” was written; the text was first published in *Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas*, a collection of commemorations by fellow philosophers celebrating the contributions of Levinas’s thought. Bankovsky, for example, builds her whole analysis around this given, stating that Derrida “intends to celebrate, in a spirit of gratefulness, the work of Levinas,” and that his work “has a precise and determined end, namely, to give thanks to Levinas.”<sup>15</sup> The question that logically follows is how Derrida succeeds (or fails) in expressing his gratitude. Critchley’s chapter has a similar starting point, and the question it asks is straightforward: “how, then, does one write a text for Emmanuel Levinas?”<sup>16</sup>

His approach to answering this question revolves around the following double bind. On the one hand, according to Levinas, “the ethical work must be given in radical generosity. The

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<sup>15</sup> Bankovsky, “A Thread of Knots,” 3.

<sup>16</sup> Critchley, *Ethics of Deconstruction*, 111.

work must be sent out from the Same to the Other without ever returning to the same.”<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, he observes, “by writing a text *for* Emmanuel Levinas, by paying homage to his work and recalling how his work works, one would return the work to its author, thereby betraying the ethical structure that Levinas’s work tries to set to work.”<sup>18</sup> According to Critchley, Derrida’s solution to this problem is to receive Levinas’s work “*ungratefully*,” and to write a “*faulty*” text, *not* in return to Levinas, but one that is written for the Other.<sup>19</sup> In his own words: “ingratitude is the only mode in which one can write a text *for* Levinas if that text is going to maintain the ethical structure that Levinas’s work sets to work.”<sup>20</sup>

I believe that Critchley’s account is misleading for the following reason. He mistakenly assumes that “what is at stake here is nothing less than the success or failure of Levinasian ethics.”<sup>21</sup> I content that it is not Derrida’s aim at all to “maintain the ethical structure” of Levinas’s work.<sup>22</sup> Critchley rightly recognizes that ingratitude, violence, and faultiness are indispensable to Derrida’s response, but I contest his claim that these can be overcome with “ethical *performatives*” or “enactments” of Derrida’s own.<sup>23</sup> The various ways in which Derrida shows how Levinas’s work “*does not work*” are not part of an ultimate strategy to make sure that in the end “Levinas’s work works.”<sup>24</sup>

It is not my intention to diminish the significance of the context of this text, but I do argue that it is by no means limited to *Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas*. I believe it to be significant that the text was later reprinted, with a few revisions (and some retranslations), in another collection of essays, entirely of Derrida’s own, entitled *Psyche: Inventions of the Other* (published in French in 1987).<sup>25</sup> This re-contextualization is not usually regarded as problematic to Derrida’s “original” intentions. Yet, in an introduction for the new collection, Derrida admitted that it could be seen

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 110-11.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 110-12.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>22</sup> I am with Häggglund that it is misleading to think of deconstruction as endowed with an “ethical motivation” in the Levinasian sense. Critchley’s *The Ethics of Deconstruction* is one of the works Häggglund cites for making this assumption. See Häggglund, “The Necessity of Discrimination,” 57-61.

<sup>23</sup> Critchley, *Ethics of Deconstruction*, 115-16.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 110, 112, 117, 129. Bankovsky makes a similar argument, stating that “Derrida’s various failures in giving thanks in fact constitute, together, the successful giving of thanks” (“A Thread of Knots,” 10).

<sup>25</sup> All references in this thesis are to this version.

as improper or out-of-place to dissociate the texts from their original contexts into this new configuration.<sup>26</sup> What does this “configuration in displacement,” as Derrida calls it, tell us about the purposes and intentions of “At This Very Moment”? Can we be sure that the text is meant to express his gratitude to Levinas? What does it mean to repeat, alter, revise, or supplement such a personal gift to the other? Are the author’s revisions for inclusion in *Psyche* for example also for Emmanuel Levinas?

Critchley and Bankovsky read “At This Very Moment” within the back and forth of a dual relationship between two intimately acquainted philosophers. The exclusive focus on *Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas*, a collection of essays by friends who were close to Levinas, only adds to the presumed intimacy of their relationship. This perspective overlooks, or downplays, one of the most salient characteristics of Derrida’s text, namely that it is written in multiple voices. John Llewelyn describes the text as a polylogue or “polygraph”; although the text is purportedly given to Emmanuel Levinas and signed “Jacques Derrida,” there are multiple voices at work, which together “have conspired” to produce this text.<sup>27</sup> It is unfortunate that Llewelyn does not dwell more on this, but his interpretation already comes closer to my own.

Although we must indeed start “supposing” that Derrida wishes to write a text for Levinas (Derrida repeats this word “suppose” four times [ATVM: 146-48/162-64]), this is not certain; it is not certain that the desire is *his* or comes from him. We therefore must also “suppose,” as Derrida says, “that in tracing the gift I commit a fault, that I let [*laisse*] a fault, as they say, slip in, that I don’t write straight [*droit*], that I fail [*n’arrive pas*] to write as one must [*comme il faut*]... or that I fail to give him, *to him*, a gift that is not *his, from him* [*de lui*]” (ATVM: 149/164-65). The possibility of committing a fault should be taken seriously, as an irreducible experience of gift and response, and should not be reduced to an ultimate strategy to preserve a work with another work (“If it [the fault] were *inevitable*—and therefore irreparable in the final accounting—why should one have to ask for its reparation?” [ATVM: 149/165]).<sup>28</sup> What is a faulty response? How does one write and read a faulty text?

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<sup>26</sup> Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, xii

<sup>27</sup> Llewelyn, *The Genealogy of Ethics*, 156-63.

<sup>28</sup> Van der Heiden says that Derrida cannot respond to Levinas without running the risk of a fault: “Only if we take this risk, we have the chance of doing justice to such a work” (“The Contaminated Wound,” 273). But must we run the risk of the fault in order to do justice to a work, or to do it an injustice?

What is at stake with “At This Very Moment” is not the success or failure of a work, an ethics, or an expression of gratitude, but, in the words of Derrida, the “possibility” of “another gift, the gift of the other”—or “the invention of the other” according to one of the revisions in *Psyche* (ATVM: 147/163). We must welcome the chance that “perhaps” (another word Derrida uses often) the work is both given to and comes from *another*. This will require a wholly different strategy, one that involves manners of communication otherwise than speech acts or ethical sayings, that extends beyond the “first” and “final” words of Derrida’s response, and that includes voices other than strictly those of Derrida and Levinas alone.

To understand why this strategy is necessary, we must first understand that “At This Very Moment” does not stand on its own. In the following, I will briefly look at three major texts in the exchange between Levinas and Derrida leading up to the writing of this text. Since I cannot go into the details of each of these works, the focus will be on those sections where they directly address or respond to one another, sections where their respective views on communication and miscommunication are immediately put into practice.

## 1.2. Earlier exchanges

### 1.2.1. Totality and Infinity

When in “Violence and Metaphysics” Derrida wishes to convey the significance of what Levinas tries to accomplish with *Totality and Infinity*, he points at its daring attempt toward a radically other speech, a speech of the Other (VM: 100-103/120-23). This “prophetic speech,” he continues, attempts to take on the form of a liberation from an oppression that, quoting from the preface of *Totality and Infinity*, resembles “the visage of being that shows itself in war,” “fixed in the concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy” (VM: 102/123; TI: 21/x). Beyond this philosophical oppression, supposedly upheld from Plato all the way to Husserl and Heidegger, Levinas imagines an eschatological peace that makes possible “existents that can speak” and that “breaks with the totality of wars and empires in which one does not speak” (TI: 23/xi).

Roughly speaking, what Levinas calls here totalizing and violent is any philosophical discourse that prioritizes inner reasoning or internal monologue over human interaction. He argues that a preference for keeping silent and inward listening is ubiquitous in Western philosophy and is especially prevalent in Husserl and Heidegger. Intersubjectivity and communication with the other person, he argues, would in such cases be mediated by ontology or consciousness; it would start only from me, from my freedom and my own initiative.<sup>29</sup> This possibility of non-participation, of evading being questioned and having to answer for one's thoughts and words, would according to Levinas give rise to nothing but a violent and confusing world.<sup>30</sup>

As alternative to this philosophical paradigm, Levinas proposes to make the human relationship contemporaneous with language. As *Totality and Infinity* puts it: "the relation between the same and the other... is language" (TI: 39/9); and "the essence of language is the relation with the Other" (TI: 207/182). Language is thus first of all *participation*, the implication that I and the Other are personally present when we engage one another (TI: 96-100/69-73, 180-83/155-58, 296-97/272-73). This, in turn, makes it impossible for me to hide in silence from my responsibility to listen and respond to the other person: "I cannot evade by silence the discourse which the epiphany that occurs as a face opens" (TI: 201/175).

The impossibility to keep silent before the face of the other, in a nutshell, is what separates Levinas's philosophy of speech from turning into an isolated and self-reflective monologue. To accomplish this radical departure, however, he had to reject a possibility that proved to be essential to many philosophers before him: his movement from totalizing violence to

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<sup>29</sup> In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that "keeping silent" [*Schweigen*] is an essential possibility of discourse, and that it is *Dasein's* authentic way of being-with-one-another (*Being and Time*, 203-10; *Sein und Zeit*, 160-66). It is also in "keeping silent" that the "voice of conscience" [*Stimme des Gewissens*] is heard by *Dasein* (*Being and Time*, 312, 342-45; *Sein und Zeit*, 367ff., 296-98). Heidegger's appreciation for silence is even more strongly captured in his famous dictum that "language speaks" [*Die Sprache spricht*], meaning that in speaking we listen and respond to the "soundless voice" [*lautlose Stimme*] of language *before* the voice of the other person ("The Way to Language," 123-24; "Der Weg Zur Sprache," 254-55). For Heidegger, then, "language is monologue"; it is "concerned solely with itself," "cut off from speaking and the speakers" ("The Way to Language," 111, 120, 131, 134; "Der Weg Zur Sprache," 241, 251, 262, 265). About Husserl, Levinas has said that he defines dialogue as the circulation of language between a multiplicity of thinking selves. Human dialogue, in Levinas's reading of Husserl, would then merely be the outward expression of "the silence of inner discourse," directed by the *I think* (see *Of God who Comes to Mind*, 139-43). See also TI: 67-68/39, 89/61-62, 205-12/180-87.

<sup>30</sup> This is best exemplified in Levinas's account of the terrifying nothingness of the *il y a* and the "silent world" of Gyges (see TI: 61/32, 90/62ff., 188-91/162-66; on the *il y a*, see also Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 57-64).

eschatological peace—about which Derrida says that it should make us tremble (VM: 101-2/122-23)—implies a full departure from a philosophical tradition in which the possibility of speaking and not speaking are closely intertwined, to a philosophy in which it is *necessary* to speak and *impossible* to remain silent. The risks implied in this radical departure did not go unnoticed by Derrida and were picked up in “Violence and Metaphysics.”

### 1.2.2. “Violence and Metaphysics”

If one of the reasons why Derrida wrote “Violence and Metaphysics” is because of Levinas’s daring attempt to think beyond ontological and phenomenological language toward a radically other language, then another reason is to show how difficult it actually is to accomplish this. Such a discourse, Derrida argues, can do nothing but put itself at risk. The crux is that any discourse, work, or book on the relationship with the Other is itself an instance of such a relationship, and is beholden to the very things it describes. The questions that he raises in “Violence and Metaphysics”—“questions of language and the question of language” (VM: 136/161)—are then also meant to interrogate Levinas on his responsibility for the language that he adopts.

Following Levinas, Derrida first observes that discourse must not take on the form of a showing or letting something be seen, nor must it pronounce the Other as a theme or an object—the violence of the “solitude of a mute glance” (VM: 123/147)—it must only speak *to* the other. Levinas’s own work would then be the primary normative and exemplary discourse of this necessity; it must be addressed to the other and not close the other off in philosophical monologue. At the same time, Levinas will have turned keeping silent into a risk, a risk that poses a continuous threat foremost to his very own work. The one work that announces the impossibility to keep silent must itself not be a silent work, otherwise the possibility of silence would always come back to haunt as the origin and end of all nonsilence. The impossibility of keeping silent is thus analogous to the necessity to speak.

In other words, what this means is that the necessity to speak and the impossibility to keep silent are both factual *and* normative—in the relationship with the Other one *cannot* keep silent and one *should not* keep silent. Levinas will then have to make sure that in writing his works

he keeps up the relation with the other *at all times* so as not to be overtaken by the imminent risk of silence of his own creation. He will have obligated himself to stay ahead in an interminable relationship of language with the Other. The question is whether he can do this.

It is evident from “Violence and Metaphysics” that Derrida believes that this is not possible. One of the purposes of his commentary is to show the various ways in which Levinas is overtaken by the very discourse that he tries to overcome. He shows that the direction pursued by Levinas would deprive him of the very foundation of his own language and the right to speak (VM: 144/170, 156/183). For this reason, he suggests that we must accept the possibility of “a *certain* silence, a certain beyond of speech, a certain possibility, a certain silent horizon of speech” (VM: 145-46/171-73, 162-63/191-92, 184-85/218-20). Not only the discourse of *Totality and Infinity* would rely on this possibility (VM: 151/178), but it would be the necessary condition of “*every possible language*” (VM: 156/183-84).

Levinas, *pace* Derrida, believes that it is possible to stay ahead of the risk of silence, and maintains that the possibility of keeping silent can never be a necessary condition for philosophical discourse. This is what *Otherwise than Being*, his next major work, meant to show.

### 1.2.3. Otherwise than Being

In the opening pages of *Otherwise than Being*, in what appears to be a nod to Derrida, Levinas acknowledges that the “betrayal” of the Other in the language of the Same is inevitable in philosophical discourse (OB: 5-7/16-20). However, he does not conclude from this that the possibility of philosophical discourse is thereby threatened. In my view, the portion of *Otherwise than Being* where Derrida’s influence can most strongly be felt (and which accordingly is also the most important section for “At This Very Moment”) is section 5 of Chapter V. Here Levinas puts to himself for example the following question, which I think gets to the gist of Derrida’s questions as well: “Are we not at this very moment in the process of barring the issue that our whole essay attempts, and of encircling our position from all sides?” (OB: 169/262).

Levinas answers by wondering whether it is even possible to hold a discourse that is about the other, but is not received by the other; a discourse in which the other appears, but that he



cannot interrupt. He asks, "Is silent discourse with oneself really possible?" (OB: 171/265). As for his own work, we find an answer to this rhetorical question near the end of his book:

And I still interrupt the ultimate discourse in which all discourses are stated, in saying it to one that listens to it, and who is situated outside the said that the discourse says, outside all it includes. That is true of the discussion I am elaborating at this very moment. This reference to an interlocutor permanently breaks through the text that the discourse claims to weave in thematizing and enveloping all things. (OB: 170/264)

With this important passage we have come to what I believe forms the heart of Levinas's answer to Derrida's earlier questions. For one, here he actually *performs* the interruption of the Said [*le dit*] of his own work through the Saying [*le dire*] that directs it to the Other. Secondly, not only is presented here what could be seen as a response to Derrida's questions in "Violence and Metaphysics," but with these same words Levinas *gives* his work to the other for possible further questioning. These two points are related: it is in the sense that what Levinas says *about* the Other will also be heard by the other, who can always pick up on it, that he will not be silently discoursing with himself in isolated confusion.

It is important to stress that Levinas's strategy relies wholly on the *participation* of other philosophers beyond the boundaries of the book itself. As he says in the opening pages of *Otherwise than Being*, if the philosopher does not want to stay where he is, going on in circles in a state of inward complacency, he must call, "beyond the reflection on oneself, for the critique exercised by *another* philosopher" (OB: 20/39). This, then, is what the risk of communication comes down to concretely for Levinas: "a drama between philosophers" (OB: 20/39). With drama is meant primarily "an intersubjective movement which does not resemble the dialogue of teamworkers in science" (OB: 20/39), but it also implies that the relation must be maintained without interval or a moment of absence. In other words, in philosophical drama it will not do to sit back and listen, and leave the work uninterrupted: "no one is allowed a relaxation of attention or a lack of strictness" (OB: 20/39).

To conclude, the response coming from the other is vital to Levinas's whole project since it demarcates nothing less than the very distinction between a work that is merely holding a silent

discourse with itself and a work of language that is directed to the other beyond itself. He furthermore will have made the other responsible for this distinction. This drastically complicated the situation in which Derrida now finds himself in writing his next response, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am." How Derrida with this text will attempt to give Levinas the philosophical drama that he appealed for will be taken up next.

## 2. How does one respond to Levinas?

The publication of Levinas's *Otherwise than Being* completely changed the game. Not only presented this work Levinas with an opportunity to respond to the criticisms raised by Derrida in "Violence and Metaphysics," but more impactful, hindsight allowed him to better anticipate, to a certain extent at least, how this next work would be read and received. What invoked Derrida to write "At This Very Moment" then is the unique manner in which Levinas will have tied the response coming from the other into the very fabric of his work. The way in which "At This Very Moment" will have been bound, in advance, to the work to which it will be a response, is also what made writing it drastically more complicated. Responsibility and obligation forced Derrida not to keep silent, while it also prevented him to shape his response freely, according to his own intentions and desires. For the same reason, the failure to respond or respond wrongly has now also become a possibility.

Before going into the details of "At This Very Moment," we must first examine what responding to Levinas means and what it requires to write something in return to his works—to *Otherwise than Being* in particular. Once we have insight into what makes responding to the works of Levinas uniquely complex, we can understand what makes "At This Very Moment" stand out from Derrida's other encounters with Levinas. In the following, I will examine the various ways in which "At This Very Moment" is bound, enchained, and tied to the works of Levinas, and how, at the same time, it seeks to dislodge these binds and forge a direction that is wholly unique and otherwise.

### 2.1. "How, then, does he write?"

As a starting point, I suggest the only direct textual link that exists between *Otherwise than Being* and the works of Derrida: a footnote briefly mentioning *Voice and Phenomenon*, a work by Derrida on the thought of Husserl. Although the congruity represented in this reference is

interesting (which I will not go into here),<sup>31</sup> it is equally important to pay attention to what escapes this bond. It is an indispensable part of Derrida's reading of Husserl that "I see myself write or signify by gestures,"<sup>32</sup> but this is entirely glossed over by Levinas. It is not my intention to accuse Levinas of negligence, but I do argue that his silence on written communication is symptomatic of his insistence on the spoken word. This must not have gone unnoticed to Derrida, since, as I argue in this section, it is to Levinas's manner of *writing* that "At This Very Moment" is directed.

Derrida's interest in writing is of course well known and by no means restricted to his relationship with Levinas.<sup>33</sup> One of the things that interests him about writing is that it may suggest a relationship otherwise than governed by an opposition between speaking and keeping silent. Many of his writings emphasize the silence and responselessness of writing, the muteness of graphical markers, and the absence of the author and the reader from the written work.<sup>34</sup> That does however not mean that he completely opposes writing to speaking. He also says that he never writes in silence and that his writings never lack a vocal element.<sup>35</sup> In the part of *Voice and Phenomenon* that remains unmentioned by Levinas, he argues for example that "the possibility of writing [inhabits] the inside of speech"; always the creation of something external, and always opened up to the risk of alteration or intervention from the other, writing introduces into the pure self-presence of speech the "impurity" of non-presence, difference, the outside, the world, the body, and so on.<sup>36</sup>

Returning to the works of Levinas, it is worth mentioning that Derrida already alluded to writing in "Violence and Metaphysics" (VM: 126-28/150-51). Here he wondered whether *writing*, rather than *speaking*, would better negotiate with the interval of separation between the same and the other insisted upon by Levinas. He suggested that "the writer absents himself better, that is, expresses himself better as other, addresses himself to the other more effectively than the man of speech" (VM: 127/151). He went on to argue that Levinas already has a concept of

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<sup>31</sup> The footnote in question voices Levinas's support of Derrida's choice to render "*Meinung*" in the works of Husserl by the French "*vouloir-dire*" (meaning to say). See OB: 189n.23/63n.2. See also Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon*, 15.

<sup>32</sup> Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon*, 69.

<sup>33</sup> See for example Glendinning, *Derrida*, chapter 4.

<sup>34</sup> See for example Derrida, "Différance," 3-5; "Plato's Pharmacy," 130ff.; "Signature, Event, Context," 313-16.

<sup>35</sup> Derrida and Cixous, "From the Word to Life," 1.

<sup>36</sup> Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon*, 70-72, 74, 80-85.

writing in what he says about the *trace*. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas indeed says of the *trace* that it is “inscribed or written” [*s’inscrit ou s’écrit*] (OB: 117/184) in the approach of the other as an “unpronounceable inscription” [*écriture imprononçable*] (OB: 185/284). Anticipating these remarks, Derrida wondered in “Violence and Metaphysics” if “the thematic of the *trace*... should lead to a certain rehabilitation of writing” (VM: 127/151).

It never led to a rehabilitation of writing however. As early as *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas has made it very clear that it is speech that interests him and not the “mute language” of the written sign from which I am absent (TI: 69/41, 182/157). The primacy afforded speech over writing remains furthermore undiminished in *Otherwise than Being*. By likening writing to the impersonal, uninterrupted regime of the Said, this second major work all but reinforces the association of writing with keeping silent (OB: 44/76, 51/87, 169-71/262-65). Hence, also the great lengths to which this latter work goes to make sure that its written form is continuously interrupted in the *saying* that presents it to its listeners.

Whereas Derrida’s questions in “Violence and Metaphysics” were all questions of language, it should not surprise us that in “At This Very Moment” the question is all about *writing works*: “How, then, does he write? How does what he writes make a work [*ouvrage*], and make the Work [*Œuvre*] in the work [*ouvrage*]?” (ATVM: 150/165). “How does he manage to inscribe or let the wholly other be inscribed [*laisser s’inscrire*]” within the language of being or the same (ATVM: 150/166)? And “*this book [livre] here,*” how is it delivered [*se livre*] over otherwise to the other (ATVM: 164/179)? In light of these questions, the saying that directs *Otherwise than Being* to the other must now be re-examined from the viewpoint of writing. In Derrida’s own words, what must be examined is the clandestine effect of a certain way of “tying or linking” [*lier*] “the Writing” [*l’Écrire*] to the Said, and the Saying to “the written” [*l’écrit*] (ATVM: 150/165).

## 2.2. A unique *seriasure*

Regarding how Levinas writes his works, Derrida observes that he writes in two “moments,” manners, languages, or gestures at once. The first is the thematizing and enveloping language of the Same or the Said, in which the unsayable Other is stated, preserved, and made

comprehensible. The second is the language of responsibility and Saying, in which the enveloping language of the Same is interrupted, torn, and exposed to the other. Examples that Derrida cites of the latter are phrases written using the grammatical form of the first person perspective of the present indicative, such as “at this very moment,” “this book,” or “the present work” (ATVM: 168-69/183-84). The former, which thematizes and generalizes the unique and personal language of the latter, is recognizable as the grammatical form of the third-person perspective, associated with discursive or propositional language. Examples are phrases such as “one must” or “it is necessary” [*il faut*] (ATVM: 168-70/183-85).

Next, Derrida shows how these two incommensurable and unassimilable manners of writing form in the works of Levinas an interminable “series.” If all writing is serial, what makes Levinas’s serial writing unique (and definitely more complicated), is that it does not tie together the threads of a discourse or argument, but the “interruptions between threads” (ATVM: 165/180). What Derrida means is that in saying the unsayable, the saying must be immediately unsaid, which Levinas does, but not without *saying* how he unsays it. Levinas interrupts his own discourse using one manner of writing (the second), and then, in order to save or preserve the interruption, he thematizes the interruption using the other manner of writing (the first), thereby resuming it into his discourse. While one language preserves the interruption, the other language interrupts the preservation, both at one at the same time.

Rather than going into the details of this profoundly complex way of writing, which takes Derrida the greater part of “At This Very Moment” to unravel (roughly pages 153-70/169-85),<sup>37</sup> let us focus on the implications. Part of it, I believe, comes down to the following. Levinas’s unique manner of writing makes it the only series that is impossible to interrupt, but it is also the only series which is impossible to keep uninterrupted and intact. No interruption can displace

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<sup>37</sup> In developing his argument, Derrida makes use of another text by Levinas, one of his Talmudic readings, entitled “The Name of God According to a Few Talmudic Texts.” This text struggles with the difficulty of thematizing the unthematizable—the name of God—similar to how *Otherwise than Being* struggles with thematizing the (name of the) Other. Consequently, this text is written simultaneously in two languages as well. On the one hand, Levinas says: “if... there can exist a relation different to thematization, does not the fact of speaking and thinking about it at this very moment, the fact of wrapping it up in our dialectic, mean that thought, language, and dialectic have sovereign power over this Relation?” (NG: 128/167). On the other hand, Levinas also says, “But the language of thematization that we are using at the moment has perhaps been made possible only by this Relation, and is subservient to it” (NG: 128/167). See also ATVM: 157-59/173-74.

the series of interruptions without immediately continuing it; while the only possible way to continue the series is by interrupting its continuity. Paradoxically, therefore, any interruption to the works of Levinas will *at once* render it *otherwise and will leave it the same*.

The way Levinas writes his works, then, is in drawing along interruption after interruption, forming what Derrida describes as an “interrupted series” or “a *series* of interlaced interruptions,” or simply the *seriasure* [sériature] (ATVM: 167-68/182, 175/189).<sup>38</sup> This portmanteau, formed by blending the words *series* and *erasure*, captures a manner of writing that must continuously erase its own links, but also a writing of which these erasures are its links. At first, Derrida describes this intricate bind as “a logical paradox or trap,” but is quick to withdraw these words: “I was *wrong* to speak of a trap just now. It feels like a trap only from the moment, through a will to mastery or coherence, one pretends to escape from absolute dissymmetry” (ATVM: 147/163). What Derrida is after is that Levinas’s writing is further complicated by the fact that it is not restricted to its internal logic, where it could be contained and resolved—it extends in a dissymmetrical relationship toward the other (ATVM: 147/163). This is where Derrida’s response comes into play.

### 2.3. The one that listens to it

Let us take another brief look at those crucial “moments” when the works of Levinas overflow their borders and engage the other. For example, when he says in *Otherwise than Being*: “And I still interrupt the ultimate discourse in which all discourses are stated, in saying it to one that listens to it, and who is situated outside the said that the discourse says, outside all it includes” (OB: 170/264). As previously argued, statements like these represent Levinas’s answer to the question what his work and the Other have to do with one another. It is also this answer or response that Derrida says he wants to interrogate “in its turn” (ATVM: 150-51/166).

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<sup>38</sup> A strikingly similar description of “Levinas’s writing” can be found in one of the footnotes in “Violence and Metaphysics,” where the following is said by Derrida: “It proceeds with the infinite insistence of waves on a beach: return and repetition, always, of the same wave against the same shore, in which, however, as each return recapitulates itself, it also infinitely renews and enriches itself” (VM: 397-98n.7/124n.1).

What seems to be suggested by Levinas is that the interruption of the work takes place in the “moment” of “saying,” in the speaker’s act of addressing and exposing it to the other. However, in the same “moment” that directs his work to the Other it is made unmistakably clear that the interruption cannot do without the “listening” part as well; the saying needs to be heard and received by the other in order for the interruption of the internal discourse of the same to have taken place. Levinas will thus have made interrupting his work an obligatory part of receiving his work. The responsibility of the receiver, the one to whom Levinas directs his discourse and who hears or reads it, remains (and must remain) ambiguous. What does it mean to be a reader of *Otherwise than Being*, to be addressed by Levinas, and to hear what he says?

Since one of Levinas’s readers is undeniably Derrida, the obvious approach is to examine how he responds to these questions. From the very beginning and prior to the question of responding, is “At This Very Moment” concerned with the question of reading and receiving (see also section 4.2.1.). Derrida argues that it is a mistake to think that one can read Levinas’s work, listen to what it has to say, and only then, *afterwards*, come up with something completely different. The two “moments” of receiving and responding are indissolubly linked: to receive already implies to have responded and vice versa.

Since Levinas will have made the interruption to his work take place in the moment of receiving, Derrida says about Levinas that “he will have obligated to comprehend, let us say, rather, to *receive*, because affection, an affection more passive than passivity, is party to all this... He will have obligated to ‘*read*’ it totally otherwise” (ATVM: 145/161, my emphases). Even if one wishes to formulate a response that does not conform to what his work says—one that is given in radical ingratitude, beyond all restitution—such a response, Derrida says, would still be “*in conformity*” with what one would already have read about the response. One would be struggling interminably, since *from the very instant one reads his work* one is already “caught in the circle of debt and restitution” (ATVM: 146/162): “If someone (He) tells you *from the start*: ‘Do not return to me what I give you,’ you are at fault even before he finishes talking. It suffices that you hear him, that you begin to understand and acknowledge” (ATVM: 147/163). It is for this reason that Derrida says, “nothing is more difficult than to accept a gift” (ATVM: 147/163). How does one receive otherwise the obligation to receive otherwise?



## 2.4. Engaged before any engagement

Accepting a gift is difficult in another sense as well. Levinas's way of writing will have made it ambiguous as to whether what we receive comes from him, Emmanuel Levinas, or from someone else, from the Other. The point is that Levinas will not have said that it is *he* who will have imposed the obligation to receive and to respond otherwise. Rather, it is the infinite otherness of the Other that obligates and commands us; that will have obligated him as well. As Derrida says, the said in Levinas that obligates the other to respond is itself a response to the obligation of the Other that precedes it and makes it possible (see ATVM: 150-51/166). In responding to Levinas, Derrida thus finds himself already engaged even *before* being engagement with Levinas:

If I must conform my gesture to what makes the Work [*Œuvre*] in his Work, which is older than his work, and whose Saying according to his own terms is not reducible to the Said, then there we are engaged, before any engagement, in an incredible logic, formal and nonformal. (ATVM: 147/162-63)

If, as Derrida observes, Levinas does not wish to present himself as “the subject of an operation, agent, producer, or laborer,” and if his work is consequently not of “the technical or productive order of operation” (ATVM: 172/186-87), by what force can it make the Other responsible for its interruption? If, moreover, “without authority, he does not make a work, he is not the agent or creator of his work” (ATVM: 175/189), and if consequently “what I call thus—this work—is above all not dominated by the name of Emmanuel Levinas” (ATVM: 145/161), is it even *his* work, the work of Emmanuel Levinas, that we read and respond to? If, finally, the desire to give something in return arrives “before any obligation of constraint, contract, gratitude, or acknowledgment of the debt,” and “should do without him or happen with no matter who” (ATVM: 148/164), why should we be obligated to respond to anyone in particular at all?

Then again, how can one “hear” or “know” [*entendre*] this obligation (let alone respond to it or question it) without having *first* received it from Levinas and having read about it in his work, the unique work that thematizes it and presents it to the other (ATVM: 171/186)? One

would already have had to pass through the inside of his work and listen to what Levinas will have said about the response, *before* a response even becomes possible (ATVM: 178/192). What makes accepting a gift difficult is thus that it “demands, *at the same time*, this anonymity, this possibility of indefinitely equivalent substitution *and* the singularity, rather the absolute uniqueness of the proper name” (ATVM: 148/164). It would be wrong not to direct one’s response personally to Levinas, in a unique and irrevocable context of gratitude, but one must also respond to the command of the Other, which precedes everything his works say and makes them possible (ATVM: 146-47/162).

According to Derrida, the consequence is that it is impossible to formulate a successful or right response, one that responds both to the appeal of the Other “as one must” [*comme il faut*], and in “rectitude” or “sincerity” to what Levinas will have uniquely named or given (ATVM: 148-49/164-65). There is always the risk that one fails to receive according to the language that one receives: “in the same language, in the language of the same, one may always receive badly, wrongly [*mal recevoir*], this otherwise-said” (ATVM: 145/161). What, then, will remain of the response? Must one still desire to give something to Levinas? Is there any way at all one can pay him homage or put him into question?

## 2.5. At the risk of contamination

At a certain point in “At This Very Moment,” Derrida observes about Levinas that “he likes the tear [*déchirure*], but he detests contamination” (ATVM: 162/177). Whereas Levinas rejects contamination because he associates it with the betrayal of the Other by the Same, Derrida argues that “one must welcome contamination, the *risk* of contamination” (ATVM: 162/177). Contamination seems to interest him is because it implies neither the interruption of the same nor the preservation of the other. Rather, contamination will have “interrupted the interruption” (ATVM: 167/182). What does it mean to welcome the risk of contamination? How is it different from the tear? And how can we translate this difference to Derrida’s relationship with Levinas, to the relationship between *Otherwise than Being* and “At This Very Moment”?

The reason why Levinas seems to like metaphors such as “tear,” or “seam,” or “cut” is because they invoke the interruption of the enveloping discourse and the ineffaceable trace of the other in the same (e.g. OB: 170/264). Whereas the metaphor of the tear invokes for Levinas distance and separation, for Derrida contamination is primarily a metaphor for “contact” (ATVM: 167/182). Contamination, in the words of Derrida, is “a relation between two incommensurables,” a jointure, binding, or analogy between two completely heterogeneous bodies (ATVM: 162/177). However, it is not the linear appropriation of the other by the same; it is corruption, decease, or malady, the violent unbinding or disintegration of one body by another “improper body” (ATVM: 167/182).

Derrida dedicates a large portion of his text to showing that despite Levinas’s insistence on the tear, contamination is already at work—not as an “accidental evil” [*mal accidentel*], but as “a sort of fate of the Saying” (ATVM: 167/182, 185/198). It surfaces in his manner of writing in two languages at once, in the contact between the interrupting language and the enveloping language. Levinas invariably believes that the incessant tearing of one’s work can preserve the purity of the ethical relation from being contaminated by the philosophical language of Being and the Same.<sup>39</sup> However, as Derrida counters, any attempt at “saving” [*sauver*] the interruption by “keeping it safe” [*la garder sauve*] necessarily requires “mending and resuming” [reprenant] the nonthematizable within a philosophical text, thereby inevitably “losing and ruining it all the more” (ATVM: 162/177, 166/181): “The opening of interruptions is never pure” (ATVM: 166-67/181-82).

However, the question is whether the Same will still be “the same” after this contact with the Other, or whether affection by another body, incommensurable with itself, would already have dislocated its very structure. The tear or interruption will have made the enveloping discourse possible only in interrupting, effacing, or unsaying it, in exceeding it and opening it up to its other. No discourse of the Same can preserve the Other without “retaining” [*garde*] the trace of the interruption within its structure, which “alters the same enough to absolve it from and of itself” and causes it to no longer be “kept intact” [*ne se garde pas intact*] (ATVM: 150/165, 155/171, 157/172-73, 164/179).

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<sup>39</sup> In *Otherwise than Being*, this is for example captured in a prefatory note which states that “to hear a God not contaminated by Being is a human possibility” (OB: xlvi/10; also quoted in ATVM: 167/181-82). See also NG: 121/160.

Based on the above, I interpret that there is not a moment when the works of Levinas and Derrida were separated as two instances of gift and response. From the moment Derrida reads Levinas's work he will have found the response that he would have written already "inscribed" in its language. There never was a chance that his response would be something wholly unique for which he alone would be responsible. Inversely, from its very inception, Levinas's *Otherwise than Being* is contaminated by Derrida's response before it was even written. Insofar as his works are written in such a manner that they are addressed and exposed to the other, they respond to the other and will have been determined by the other. This I believe is what Derrida means when he says, "it is by starting from the Other that writing thus gives place, gives rise [*donne lieu*] and makes for an event" (ATVM: 150/166). Likewise, Derrida will have left an invisible and inaudible trace in *Otherwise than Being* despite himself and before any engagement, which no follow-up response can efface.<sup>40</sup> He will thus have interrupted Levinas's writing before it was ever the same. Why, then, still write "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am"?

The reason why Derrida makes this response despite all the risks and faults involved, is I believe because he associates *risk* with *chance*; it is to give the other a chance that he risks writing "At This Very Moment." It is certainly not the case that Levinas leaves no room for possibility and uncertainty. Since he associates the determination of certainties with the calculating discourse of the said, the very purpose of interrupting the work and delivering it over to the other is to open it up to chance and uncertainty. The conundrum that Derrida seems to recognize, however, is that he will have obligated this possibility (in thematizing and calculating it), while *at once* making only possible, probable this obligation (in delivering it over to the Other), "and so forth" (ATVM: 158/173-74, 161-62/176-77). Thus, once again one finds oneself confronted with what Derrida calls the *seriasure*, an interminable series between interruption and repetition.

Yet Derrida argues that not only must one accept the risk of contamination, but "the risk of contamination must [*il faut*] be regularly accepted (in a series) in order for the noncontamination of the other by the rule of the same to still have a chance [*laisser sa chance*]" (ATVM: 162/177). It is only in serial contact between multiple heterogeneous bodies that

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<sup>40</sup> In other words, not only does Derrida's response to Levinas contaminate the interruption of his works in returning to them (see for example Van der Heiden, "The Contaminated Wound," 273-74), but also, as I argue here, *mutual* contamination would already have happened prior to the response or the return.

contamination can “leave a better chance” [*laisser le plus de chance*] for the trace of the other—“whence the necessity of the *series*” (ATVM: 165/180). Each interruption risks being resumed into the series, but in such a way that the interruptions will remain “numerous” [*en nombre*]; more numerous than the interruptions that Levinas will have tied into his own discourse, but also more numerous than the one interruption that is represented by Derrida’s response—“one alone is never enough” (ATVM: 165/180).

Derrida would not be responding then to Levinas to interrupt his work and render it wholly otherwise, thereby fulfilling his responsibility, but to continue it and alter it in a series extending indefinitely beyond Levinas’s work and his own work, toward the possibility of a response still to come. This response is not the next in line, which would still allow it to be anticipated, but comes, “perhaps,” in the hiatus or interval between one language, moment, work and another. How this further shaped the writing of “At This Very Moment” will become clearer in section 4. First, we need to examine what it means to read this text not only in its proximity to Levinas, but also in the uncertainty of its relation to others.

### 3. The silent feminine other

#### 3.1. In the works of Levinas

##### 3.1.1. *The problem of the third and the feminine element*

The previous section examined what makes responding to the works of Levinas uniquely difficult. It was shown that a response is more than just an acknowledgement of the gift; the other must respond and at once do more than just responding. If the response is to truly come *from* the other *from* outside the said, and go beyond what is already said, the respondent must engender, invent, or produce something uniquely of its own for which it is wholly responsible. Books call for other books, Levinas says, and these other books call for yet more other books (OB: 171/265). This opens up a whole new problematic: the response must remain both multiple and to come—always more than one response coming from more than one other.

That this movement into plurality requires a wholly different approach was already recognized by Levinas in *Otherwise than Being*, where he says: “If proximity ordered to me only the other alone, there would have not been any problem... [the responsibility for the other] is troubled and becomes a problem when a third party enters” (OB: 157/245). Once we take “the third” [*le tiers*] into account, it becomes clear that even if I were to address myself to the other person, there would still remain an infinite number of speakers and listeners ignored and forgotten, cut off from the face-to-face relationship. Addressing my work to the other would in that case multiply rather than reduce the risks of keeping silent.

Although Levinas does significantly more justice to this problematic in *Otherwise than Being*, it was already anticipated in *Totality and Infinity*, where it is stated that language presupposes plurality: “language is universal because it is the very passage from the individual to the general, because it offers things which are mine to the Other” (TI: 76/49). For language to attain this universality, however, Levinas needs to find a way to transcend the subject’s finite address to the face of the Other, without mediating the human relationship with universal

concepts. As he himself says, what is needed is “a plane both presupposing and transcending the epiphany of the Other in the face, a plane where the I bears itself beyond death and recovers also from its return to itself” (TI: 253/231).

Levinas proposes that this plane “beyond the face” is that of love and fecundity. This is undoubtedly one of the most controversial parts of his work, which has all to do with the asymmetrical roles that he assigns to the woman figure vis-à-vis the figure of man.<sup>41</sup> Given the prominence of this debate, it is peculiar that relatively scant response has been given to the inability to speak and respond that Levinas accords only to the feminine. *Totality and Infinity* clearly states that the language that the woman offers is “a silent language, an understanding without words, an expression in secret” (TI: 155/129). This silence furthermore is what according to Levinas makes her secondary to man who alone possesses the language required to establish society, community, and humanity beyond the face-to-face relationship.

It has been noted by several scholars that Derrida all but neglected to comment on the issues of plurality and sexual difference when writing “Violence and Metaphysics.”<sup>42</sup> Since the same cannot be said of “At This Very Moment,” some investigation of these themes in the works of Levinas will be in order before turning to Derrida’s response. The following is a reading that is sympathetic toward Levinas’s interpretation of sexual difference (without ignoring the criticisms), but that aims to be critical toward the feminine’s inability to speak and respond.

To understand Levinas’s standpoint, it is important to note that it is derived from the feminine figures and family relations that can be found in the Jewish literary tradition (and not from biological distinctions).<sup>43</sup> In works such as “Judaism and the Feminine Element” and “And God Created Woman,” we can read how he tries to voice the “secret presence” of the feminine figures of the Old Testament (JFE: 32/48), while at once showing their subordinate position to the figures of man. I summarize:

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<sup>41</sup> The contributions to this debate are too numerous to cite, but a significant portion of it is covered in Chanter, *Feminist Interpretations of Levinas*; Guenther, *The Gift of the Other*; and Sandford, *The Metaphysics of Love*.

<sup>42</sup> Atterton, “Levinas and the Language of Peace,” 67-68; Van der Heiden, “The contaminated wound,” 278.

<sup>43</sup> The Judaic influences on Levinas’s account of the feminine are examined in detail in Katz, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine*. See also Guenther, “Like a Maternal Body,” for a discussion on biological sexuality and Biblical narrative in the works of Levinas.

1) Through “the work [*travail*] of man,” the work of the mind, reason, and manufacture, man creates a “masculine existence” in which he feels but alone and alienated (JFE: 32-34/48-51).

2) The woman draws man out of his solitary and wandering existence by offering him love, communion, and shelter. However, she draws him near herself only to once again isolate the two of them in the intimacy and self-complacency of love and family, and the peace and quiet of the home (JFE: 32-34/48-51).

3) This closed-off intimacy is transcended with the birth of children. In offspring is introduced the eschatological promise of the fulfilment of Israel and the multiplication of “the image of God inscribed on the faces of men.” Although the messianic blurs the distinction between the masculine and the feminine, it is the former that guides human destiny; the woman plays an indispensable yet merely subordinate role (JFE: 34-38/51-57).

What bars the feminine from participation in human society is her inability to establish a relationship that extends beyond her immediate self toward others. Although Levinas praises the feminine for her hospitality—she is “the welcoming one par excellence” (TI: 157/131)—the welcome that she offers is only partial and remains exclusive, secretive, and intimate. That is the reason why *Totality and Infinity* states, “the feminine is the other refractory to society, member of a dual society, an intimate society, a society without language” (TI: 265/242). Whereas the woman figure can only offer family and dwelling, the male figures of the Talmud are not restricted to these sites, as Levinas observes: “the husband has a life outside the home: He sits on the Council of the city; he has a public life; he is at the service of the universal.”<sup>44</sup>

Let me clarify that the above aims to describe a duality in the moral human subject only, and not a hierarchy between feminine and masculine empirical beings. What I think Levinas tries to convey here is an insoluble dilemma between individual responsibility, one’s infinite responsibility for the other person, on the one hand, and general interest, one’s responsibility for the infinite others of the other, on the other hand. This dilemma determines every single subject,

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<sup>44</sup> Levinas, “And God Created Woman,” 169.



male or female. However, and herein lies the inequality, I believe, Levinas has it that this struggle is ultimately guided by the masculine and not the feminine.<sup>45</sup>

I will come back to this. First, to understand why he makes this distinction we must turn to what he says about the different roles of the man and the woman in the conception of the child and the dissemination of offspring. If fecundity and offspring are the key to humanity and the coming of the third, then why should the feminine in the figure of the mother not have equal access to it, since she is clearly as responsible as the father is for bringing on earth a child?

### 3.1.2. *Maternity, paternity, and the child*

There are more than a few commentators who have raised questions about Levinas's neglect to address the maternal relationship in *Totality and Infinity*, which seemed to be more interested in the woman as lover. When Levinas does take it up in *Otherwise than Being* there still is debate as to whether his account represents a continuation or a correction of his earlier views.<sup>46</sup> The question that concerns me here is whether the feminine in the figure of the mother and in relationship to her child is able to speak and open up to society, or whether the mother continues to be a figure of silence and non-response wholly reliant on the speech of man.

On first sight, Levinas's statement that "in maternity what signifies is a responsibility for others" seems to suggest that a departure from the secondary status of the feminine has indeed been initiated (OB: 75/121). He especially recognizes in the image of the mother that bears and nurtures her child at the cost of her own body Biblical images of goodness such as the "sharing of your bread with the famished" and the "welcoming of the wretched into your house" (OB: 74-75/119-21; quotes taken from *Isaiah* 58). Maternity might accomplish my offering to the other to the point of suffering and sacrifice, but will this be sufficient to transcend the intimacy and secrecy of the dual relationship? Levinas repeatedly suggests that the mother's bodily attachment to her child leaves her unable to respond verbally or with dialogue to the unyielding suffering caused by

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<sup>45</sup> Levinas, "And God Created Woman," 164-77.

<sup>46</sup> See Bevis, "Dwelling and the Maternal Body"; Chaliel, "Exteriority of the Feminine," 174-77; Katz, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine*, chapters 9 and 10; Llewelyn, *Genealogy of Ethics*, 145-48; and Sandford, "Masculine Mothers."

the other within her. This disturbing “restlessness” [*inquiétude*] never ceases to impose itself upon her, and leaves her utterly speechless and at a loss for words. The corporal and sensible attachment of the mother to her child would be the reason why her responsibility is unmediated by conscious intent or the intellect, but it would also be the reason why she lacks the need for words, sounds, and dialogue (OB: 8/21, 25/46-47, 75/121, 101/159-60, 127/202).

It would thus appear that the mother does not need language to make up for the relationship that she can perfectly fulfil in silence with her own body. There is no indication therefore that maternity would lift the feminine from her subordinate position. This is also the conclusion that Catherine Chaliè draws: “In accomplishing too well the substitution—in their bodies—women, without the position for or quality of speech, see themselves referred to a derivative position.”<sup>47</sup> This, however, still leaves unanswered the question why the masculine would be better placed to command speech and state the human. Why would paternity, other than maternity, have need of language?

Unfortunately, Levinas does not elaborate as much on man’s relationship to language as he does on the woman’s relationship to silence. To fill in this gap, I propose Jean-Luc Marion’s liberal interpretation of fatherhood and language in the works of Levinas. His interpretation likewise builds on the Old Testament and is helpful for explaining how Levinas might have obtained the ideas that he has about paternity and language. It goes as follows. Unlike the mother who *bears* the child within her own body, Marion says, the father lacks a naturally acknowledged relationship to his child. Only language can make up for this lack and uncertainty. The father grants his son his (sur)name and the son accepts, establishing thereby through negotiation the father-son relationship. This mutual agreement between father and son has a triple function: (1) it gives the father juridical recognition that the child is his; (2) it makes the child who is no longer anonymous a recognized member of society; (3) it secures the continuation of the family line through the male part of the family.<sup>48</sup>

It is important to note that in this schema the father-son relationship is still preceded by and founded on an anonymous appeal. The appeal is first heard coming from the other who is at

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<sup>47</sup> Chaliè, “Exteriority of the Feminine,” 176.

<sup>48</sup> Marion, “Voice Without Name,” 235-40.

that moment still nameless and without identity, a stranger who can always return to this state of anonymity.<sup>49</sup> This is important since it ensures that the love that the father has for his son is not a closed relationship where both sides remain intimately bound to one another, like in maternity, but a relationship that keeps a certain distance, which must continuously be negotiated. This detached negotiation leads the subject into human society and toward the future. Levinas pictures this community as a fraternity of sons all equally other through their bond to “the commonness of a father” (TI: 214/189-90). The father is placed as the unique origin and sole responsible one at the basis of the multiplication and dissemination of his sons and his sons’ sons. This “incessant recommencement” of the subject beyond his finite lifetime is what Levinas describes as “fecundity engendering fecundity,” or “the gift of the power of giving” (TI: 269/247).

As an account of sexual difference, the above certainly is problematic, but in another reading, one that is often overlooked, it describes the very movement of the philosophical work beyond itself into a community of infinite readings and interpretations to come. The different relationships of the feminine and the masculine to the Other is reflected in what Levinas says in *Totality and Infinity* about the relationship of the author to his work. He says about the work that it is “dead” [*mort*] or “remains mute” [*reste muette*] if it is kept in the possession of an isolated finite being at home with itself (TI: 226-30/201-206). The son is not such a work, Levinas insists, the son is a “work of language” (TI: 74/47), a fecund work that is not “my work [*oeuvre*], like a poem or an object, nor is he my property... I do not have my child; I am my child” (TI: 277/254).

In the same section that develops the themes of fecundity and paternity, Levinas goes on to say that “philosophy itself constitutes a moment of this temporal accomplishment, a discourse always addressed to another. What we are *now* exposing is addressed to those who shall wish to read it” (TI: 269/247). In light of the above, I take this to mean that the philosophical author—Levinas in this case—does not possess his work, but *is* his work; he alone is responsible and will have to answer for it. At the same time, his authorship is never given, but remains always to be negotiated and re-negotiated as the work spreads beyond the author’s grasp. The relationship of the philosopher to his work is thus simultaneously one of *participation and dispossession*—the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 236-37.

author, so to speak, *attends* in person the *usurpation* of his work by the other (TI: 99/72-73, 175-76/150-51, 226-28/201-204).

To conclude, the departure from solitary and isolated existence to the face-to-face relationship in language, discussed in section 1.2.1., has in this section been supplemented with a second movement, namely from feminine silence, intimacy, and duality to messianic language guided by the figures of man. However, Levinas insists that feminine responsibility must always be kept in human fraternity to counter the threat of the solitary “spirit in its masculine existence” (JFE: 32-33/48-50). Likewise, the relationship between father and child does not annul the conjugal bond. As Levinas says: “the encounter with the Other as feminine is required in order that the future of the child come to pass from beyond the possible, beyond projects” (TI: 267/245). Accordingly, the fecund work should still go through the feminine, who as mute bearer and nurturer and the provider of dwelling, makes the work possible at her own expense. Has the feminine figure then truly nothing to say in all this?

## 3.2. In “At This Very Moment”

### 3.2.1. *Writing as a man*

It has been remarked that “At This Very Moment” is much more critical of Levinas *vis-à-vis* the feminine than “Violence and Metaphysics,”<sup>50</sup> where Derrida’s attention to the issue was limited to nothing more than a single footnote. This footnote is nevertheless not insignificant, and is quoted and expanded upon in “At This Very Moment.” It makes the argument that *Totality and Infinity* pushes the respect for dissymmetry to the point where it is impossible, “essentially impossible,” that it could have been written by a woman: “its philosophical subject is a man” (VM: 412n.92/228n.1; ATVM: 180/193). And yet it is not entirely clear what direction Derrida wants to take with this comment. It could be seen as an iteration of the common critique that Levinas

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<sup>50</sup> See Sandford, *Metaphysics of Love*, 61-63; see also Katz, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine*, 74-75.

adopts “a man’s point of view,”<sup>51</sup> but it could also be read as a praise of Levinas’s choice not to dissimulate his empirical position as a man and feign neutrality. Regardless, it still leaves the question asked by Stella Sandford: what does it mean to “write as a man,” and to write from this position about the feminine other? And how would one not “write as a man”?<sup>52</sup>

One could propose yet another view. In acknowledging his male point of view, one could also say that Levinas tries to take responsibility for the finitude of his undeniably male-oriented discourse. By describing the feminine as unsayable, hidden, and mysterious, he ensures that there remains always an opening toward the inassimilable other in what otherwise would risk becoming exclusive and essentializing discourse. As unspoken surplus, excess, or remainder, the feminine as the figure of the silent other would then figure as the guarantee that there is no closure to discourse—to Levinas’s male-oriented discourse—and that there always remains something to say. This seems to accord with Tina Chanter’s interpretation. She says:

It is not, perhaps, for Levinas to break this silence. Rather, it is his silence which opens a space for others, those who have always been Other, and who are beginning to be radically other—women—to speak, to write their otherness.<sup>53</sup>

However, unlike man, can women indeed speak or write? This is not at all obvious. How can the voice of the wholly other come from the feminine if her otherness consists exactly in being silent? Following Levinas, it would seem that either she must renounce speech to keep her feminine alterity, or she must renounce that alterity in order to speak for herself. Does Levinas’s account then provide the feminine with a voice—“the voice of the radically Other”<sup>54</sup>—or does it take “voice” away from the feminine in order to preserve her otherness?

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<sup>51</sup> The first to make this argument against Levinas was Simone de Beauvoir in a footnote in her influential *The Second Sex* (38n.3).

<sup>52</sup> Sandford, *Metaphysics of Love*, 62.

<sup>53</sup> Chanter, “Feminism and the Other,” 38.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

That this is indeed the question in “At This Very Moment” is suggested by another text it quotes on this point, namely an “unpublished writing” [*écriture inédite*] by Catherine Chalié.<sup>55</sup> Writing about Levinas, Chalié suggests that to “invent some surprising faults [*fautes inédites*],” and to “cause to be heard [*faire entendre*]” a thinking that “comes from elsewhere [*vient d’ailleurs*],” “is not perhaps without connection to a certain *mutism of the feminine*” (quoted in ATVM: 182/196, my emphasis). What are we to make of these two references in “At This Very Moment,” one to “Violence and Metaphysics,” a well-known and well-read work of Derrida’s own, and one to an unknown text written by a female writer that was yet without a readership; one expressing the essential silence and inability to speak of the woman, and the other suggesting that despite her “mutism,” or maybe because of it, the woman is capable of making herself heard as Other?

Male point of view is part of the issue, but as should be clear from the above, the problematic is more profound than just a dissymmetry between the male and female counterparts *within* sexual difference; it also involves a dissymmetry in ability to speak or respond. It is at this point that a careful reading of “At This Very Moment” is called for.

### 3.2.2. *The other of the Saying of the wholly other*

In broad lines, the argument in “At This Very Moment” is that Levinas has made bodily existents, which are always of one sex or the other, secondary to the wholly other beyond or before sexual difference (ATVM: 180/194). However, the crux is that “once sexual difference is subordinated, it always so happens that the wholly other who is *not yet marked* happens to be *already* marked by masculinity” (ATVM: 180/194). This strange outcome—“how can one mark as masculine *the very thing* said to be anterior or still foreign to sexual difference?” (ATVM: 180/194)—does, I believe, indeed follow from Levinas’s exposition on the subject as elaborated in section 3.1. Why is it that only the masculine can transcend sexual difference toward the sexually indifferent,

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<sup>55</sup> Chalié’s text, titled *Figures du féminin: Lecture d’Emmanuel Levinas*, was not yet published when “At This Very Moment” was first printed in 1980, but has since been published. For full reference to her work, see ATVM: 422n.14/196n.1.

whereas the feminine other—"the Other as other sex" or as "otherwise sexed" (ATVM: 179/193)—is the other only to the masculine within sexual duality?

In the following, I interpret Derrida's comment that the works of Levinas could not have been written by a woman but only by a man, from the viewpoint of the dissymmetry in ability to speak or to write between the feminine and the masculine, as developed in the works of Levinas. My reasoning is that the movement beyond sexual difference is identical to the movement toward plurality, anonymity, humanity, the third, the to come, etc., accomplished as fecundity, reproduction, and the dissemination of offspring. Is it not only man in the works of Levinas who has the capacity to pronounce, name, and negotiate this difference? How, on the other hand, is the woman expected to narrate beyond her sexual position if she is confined to the dual relationship, to interiority and the home, secrecy and intimacy, sensibility and the body? If the woman is incapable of writing books, of producing or engendering works, then how could a woman have written the work of Levinas? Is it not "essentially impossible" that a woman engenders a work that does not grant women the capacity to engender works? In other words, how can *she say* that she is the silent other? Is it not only *he* that can *say* this?

Levinas writes as a man—his text "assumes the sexual mark," a masculine "I-he" (ATVM: 180/193)—this is undeniably true, but what in my eyes is more problematic is his attempt to move beyond his point of view as a man toward the wholly "un-marked" other, and thus beyond the feminine other as well. This movement is accomplished in the paternal relationship, but this same relationship—in which the father repeats itself and differs from itself in his relationship to his sons—also iterates and disseminates the masculine mark. As an example of such a lineage or genealogy Derrida cites the tradition of Talmudic commentaries on which Levinas bases his interpretation of the feminine, "a whole network of affirmations," which he says is "not neutral" (ATVM: 182/196). Observing that in the works of Levinas "it is nearly always 'son' (and 'paternity') *that is said*" (ATVM: 179/193, my emphasis), Derrida wonders what would be the place of the *unmentioned daughter*?

Is "son" another word for "child," a child who could be of one sex or the other?... And why couldn't "daughter" play an analogous role?... Why should "son" better represent, in advance, this indifference? This unmarked indifference? (ATVM: 179/193)

In other words, as Derrida tries to show, in going “beyond” itself toward the other, Levinas work repeats and carries over the “mark,” or signature or name, of the male author, inevitably marking with the masculine the sexually unmarked. That is why he argues that “the making-secondary of sexual alterity” from a position of sexual indifference becomes “mastery [*maîtrise*] of sexual difference,” which in turn extends into the “mastery of femininity,” “the very thing that *it would have been necessary not to master*” (ATVM: 183/197). This is how he puts it:

Made secondary by responsibility for the wholly other, sexual difference (and hence, He says [*dit-Il*], femininity) holds itself back [*se retient*], as other, within the economic zone of the same. Included in the same, it [*elle*] is by the same stroke excluded: enclosed within, foreclosed within the immanence of a crypt, incorporated in the Saying that says itself, calls itself that of the wholly other [*le Dire qui se dit du tout autre*]. (ATVM: 183/197)

To be precise, then, it is *feminine silence*, her inability to respond with a saying of her own, that is “the other of the *Saying* of the wholly other” [*l’autre du Dire du tout-autre*], which is a saying that is incessantly heard and understood as a “says he.” Since Levinas’s whole work is dedicated to (the) *saying* (of) the wholly other, does it not follow that *feminine silence* is the wholly other of his work, of what he says in those work of the other?

The secondary status of the sexual, and therefore, *He says*, of feminine difference, does it [*elle*] not then come to figure the wholly other of this *Saying of the wholly other* in the *seriesure* here determined, in the idiom of this negotiation? Does it [*elle*] not sketch, on the inside of the work, a surfeit of *un-said alterity* [*altérité non dite*]? Or said, precisely, *as a secret or as a symptomatic mutism*? (ATVM: 183/197, my emphases)

According to Katz’s interpretation of “At This Very Moment,” the future work “cannot” be a daughter because “the author writing the descriptions is [and must be] a man.”<sup>56</sup> But this is only part of the argument. The repetition of this double “necessity”—the necessity to write as a

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<sup>56</sup> Katz, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine*, 74-75, 169n.43.



man, and the necessity to keep silent as a woman—does not close off all possibilities. It is here that Catherine Chalié's earlier point that the other is "perhaps" heard coming from a certain "mutism of the feminine" comes into play. If the feminine other finds a way to respond to the writings of men, and make herself heard, then this must be for reasons completely different than her ability to write her own response. However, this implies that the response to Levinas's work is heard coming from a certain feminine "responselessness," from her lack of the possibility to respond, and from within the writings of men.<sup>57</sup> Is this possible? And where would that leave Derrida's response to Levinas?

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<sup>57</sup> Derrida makes a similar argument in "A Word of Welcome." He says, "[What Levinas calls] feminine alterity seems marked by a series of lacks... What is lacking here is nothing else than an eminent possibility of language" (*Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 36). However, her human capacity to welcome and to nurture makes her nonetheless speak a language (whereas for example the animal does not), but the language that she speaks is "simply 'silent'" (ibid., 36-37). He then raises the following question: since *Totality and Infinity* remains "turned," "from a masculine point of view," toward the silence and responselessness of the feminine other, is it not from this "abyss" that we must try to interpret the "writing, language (languages), and composition" of Levinas's singular book (ibid., 39)? The reason is given later on, when he says that the silence that "comes to us from the abyss" is also "the silence out of which we speak," the possibility or "the gift of speech" (ibid., 114-17). However, this still leaves the question: "How is one to hear this silence? Who can hear it?" (ibid., 115), which I think is pertinent to the silence of the feminine as well.

## 4. Responses to come

### 4.1. Derrida's gift to you

In the previous sections, I highlighted in a still somewhat preliminary manner some of Derrida's concerns with the works of Levinas. What I did not consider is the multiple voices that are threaded into his text. The first thing to notice about "At This Very Moment" is that it alternates between multiple voices (indicated with a dash in the text). This manner of writing suggests the addition of another speaker, a third voice—in this case, a feminine voice, as it turns out—besides the two voices of Levinas and Derrida that are already partaking in the dialogue. This is by far not the only text by Derrida that is written in a plurality of voices like this. In an oral interview, he once remarked: "I never write in silence, I listen to myself, or I listen to the dictation of another voice, of more than one voice: staging therefore, dance, scenography of terms, of breath and of 'changes in tone.'"<sup>58</sup> In another interview, he described this style of writing as "a chorus," "a choreographic text with polysexual signatures."<sup>59</sup> In the case of the work entitled "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am," how does he do this? How does he write in more than one voice and gender, in the voice and gender of the other? How does he listen and let the other dictate what he writes?

"Now what I 'want' to 'do' here," Derrida writes, "is to accept the gift, to affirm and reaffirm it as what I have received" (ATVM: 147/163). However, he continues, "not from someone who himself took the initiative for it [i.e. Levinas] but from someone who would have had the force to receive it and *reaffirm* it" (ATVM: 147/163). This "someone" [*quelqu'un(e)*; masculine or feminine] is neither "me," nor "him"—it is "you" (ATVM: 148/164).

And if it is thus that (in my turn) I give to you, it will no longer form a chain of restitutions, but another gift, the gift of the other. The invention of the other. Is that possible? (ATVM: 147/163)

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<sup>58</sup> Derrida and Cixous, "From the Word to Life," 1.

<sup>59</sup> Derrida and McDonald, "Choreographies," 76.

The other voice that speaks within Derrida's text thus comes from *you*, here neither named nor anonymous, absolutely singular, but always more than one (ATVM: 145-46/161-62). In addressing his work to you, from a masculine author to, as it turns out, a feminine reader (ATVM: 178/192), one of the consequences is that you are no longer a *neutral* receiver or a silent listener. You are not a bystander in the *drama* that is unfolding between Levinas and Derrida, but you participate in it. You are the other from whom Derrida accepts the gift, it is you to whom he listens, it is you who dictates it to him, and it is to you that his response is given. You, feminine reader, are the author of the text, you are its inventor, its bearer and nurturer, and you are responsible for it.

It [*elle*] is first of all yours, the one of reading to which 'this moment' is given, confided, or delivered over. Your reading is thus no longer a simple reading that deciphers the sense of what is already found in the text; it has a limitless (ethical) initiative. It [*Elle*] obligates itself freely starting from the text of the Other, which today one might say, wrongly, it [*elle*] *produces or invents*. (ATVM: 161/176)

With this, Derrida deconstructs the dual hierarchies present in the works of Levinas between speech and silence, speaker and listener, giver and receiver, masculine and feminine, outside and inside, etc. In reading Derrida's response, we therefore must no longer think that we know who does the speaking and who does the listening, who speaks and who remains silent. Least of all should we assume that the reader is a passive recipient of the utterances spoken or performed by the other, a patient listener waiting for her turn to speak.

With these final considerations in mind, let me once again turn to my reading of "At This Very Moment." My strategy for the following is to follow the multiple voices that are threaded into Derrida's intervallic text. I think it is right to read these intervals as actively and creatively as possible, while also staying as close to the text as possible, which I believe is in keeping with Derrida's blurring of the distinction between reading and writing. I will start with the opening pages and will proceed from there along the multiple shifts of speaker and listener, author and reader, male and female that are threaded into the text. As will become clear, each consecutive

interruption is longer than the previous one, and takes over more and more of the work, and this more and more violently and disruptively, until the voices become indistinguishable near the end.

## 4.2. A series of interruptions

### 4.2.1. *The instant of reading*

“At This Very Moment” opens with the phrase, “he will have obligated” [*il aura obligée*], words that appear to be taken from the works of Levinas. That Levinas never actually pronounced these words indeed “matters little” (ATVM: 145/161). It also matters little what or who is obligated—the phrase is purposefully left ambiguous and distanced from every context, so that aside from obligation, it also inscribes probability, risk, uncertainty, and chance (ATVM: 143-44/159-60). What matters is that these are the very first words that we read from which everything else in “At This Very Moment” follows. What does it mean to read these words—“he will have obligated”—at this very instant of reading what Derrida says to Levinas?

The phrase is immediately followed by the sentence: “At this very moment, you hear me, I have just said it” [*A l’instant même, tu m’entends, je viens de le dire*] (ATVM: 143/159). This statement suggests that a rather straightforward dialogue is being initiated between “you” and “me,” in which “I,” the author, speak and “you,” the reader, listen; but this dialogue is preceded and directed by what “he” will have obligated. However, this phrase uttered in the grammatical form of the anonymous third person, “where does it come from [*d’où vient-elle*]? Who pronounced it?” (ATVM: 143/159). We might presume that it is said by Levinas, prior to reading it here in Derrida’s text; this certainly is possible, as Derrida admits, but not certain, since he never pronounced the phrase as such (ATVM: 145/161). And yet, coming from an outside without a determinable origin and overflowing all borders, “you hear it resonate, at this very moment, in this work” (ATVM: 144/161).

From the start, we are thus made uncomfortable with the distinction in Levinas between the saying that commands me to the other in a wholly unique and irreplaceable event, and the

thematization of this saying in a repeatable said. Regarding the words “he will have obligated,” Derrida says that “you are no longer without them,” and that you have already become “sensitive to the strange event [événement]” (ATVM: 143/159). You can no longer say that “nothing is happening” [rien n’arrive] (ATVM: 144/160), but maybe because it is not the face of the other that appeals to you in this anonymous command, you are not “uneasy” [tu n’es pas inquiète], and what you feel is not a “malaise” (ATVM: 144/160; words associated with maternity). In this listening without responding, this proximity without contact, or “affection” without “touch” (ATVM: 144/160), everything is left uninterrupted and in place; nothing is yet received otherwise, and no one has yet responded with a saying otherwise than the said.

#### 4.2.2. *Not letting be*

The first change of voice comes relatively early in the text. Derrida has been hinting increasingly at your participation throughout these early pages, and it becomes clear that you will not be able to keep up for long your position as listener. Since Levinas says that one must not decide upon the place of the Other in the work—and the place of the work among others—in solitude and isolation, but in open society with others—with you—the text that Derrida writes here for Levinas will have to *incorporate* you, while it must also be *borne* by you. You thus find it hard to stay quiet: “Since your body is at stake [il y va de ton corps] in this fault, and since, as I said a moment ago, the gift I would make him comes from you who dictates it to me, you are more and more worried [ton inquiétude accroît]” (ATVM: 149/165).

Hence, it is in response to the question, “Where should we, you and I, let it be [laisser être]?” (ATVM: 149/165), that the first change of voice takes place. However, this early in the text, your intervention amounts to nothing more than the following line:

No, not let it be [pas le laisser être]. Soon [tout à l’heure], we will have to give it to eat, and to drink [il nous faudra le donner à manger, et à boire], and you will listen to me. (ATVM: 149/165)

Admittedly, not much is revealed in this retort. Yet it is striking that the first word coming from you—which affirms your presence and participation—is a *no*. Levinas says that it is never the authority of a separated self but only the participation of the other that can affirm my speech: “it is not I, it is the other that can say *yes*” (TI: 93/66). You then say that we must not “let it be,” which is undoubtedly a reference to the Heideggerian mode of *Gelassenheit*, criticized by Levinas.<sup>60</sup> Levinas says in *Totality and Infinity* that “to ‘let him be’ the relationship of discourse is required” (TI: 71/43), and that “speaking, rather than ‘letting be,’ solicits the Other” (TI: 195/169).

But why speak “soon”? Why must the speech of the other be postponed to an indeterminate moment in the near future (sooner than later)? Why would it not be possible for you to speak and be heard *right now*, at this very instant? Even when you interrupt and speak it seems that you are somehow still incapable of responding. The *yes* of the other takes on the form of a *no*. Your *no* might here be taken as a refusal to acknowledge that decision can be reached within the boundaries of the negotiation taking place between “you” and “I”—“we”—which would still seek to enclose a body or corpus into the intimacy of a community or fraternity. So instead, you say that there will be a change of speaker and listener, and that the ones who are speaking now will have to listen later.

It will only be after a series of *intervals*—more than one, more than this one—that you, the other, will have a chance to respond. To pass these intervals—sexual, temporal, genealogical—you say that we must *give it*, but whether we must give it food and drink with our own bodies, *letting* it eat and drink, or whether we must give it up, *leave it*, as food and drink to be eaten, is not specified in the grammar. Regardless, the reference to maternity and feminine hospitality should be clear, and it is not inconceivable that it is the feminine, mute bearer and nurturer of the other, that will be heard.

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<sup>60</sup> Letting be in Heidegger means letting an existent be discovered and encountered in the Being that it is; or in the case of the other, it means letting the other be the other (*Being and Time*, 114-22; *Sein und Zeit*, 83-88). Only by “authentically Being-their-Selves” [*eigentlichen Selbstsein*], Heidegger says, can people “authentically be with one another” [*das eigentliche Miteinander*] and “let the Others who are with it ‘be’” [*die mitseienden Anderen ‘sein’ zu lassen*] (*Being and Time*, 344-45; *Sein und Zeit*, 298). See also Heidegger’s “The Way to Language,” where *Gelassenheit* is described as the state in which we can “listen freely” [*freien hören*] for the “soundless voice” [*lautlose Stimme*] of language (“The Way to Language,” 123, 130; “Der Weg Zur Sprache,” 254-55, 262).

#### 4.2.3. *The arrival of another text*

The next interruption follows a few pages further on and is already more disruptive. You no longer wait to be addressed or to be asked a question; you interrupt mid-sentence, and it is *you* who this time asks questions. What makes it suddenly possible for you to do this—to speak, again?

In the pages directly leading up to this intervention, Derrida revealed his interest in Levinas's writing (discussed in section 2.1.). He said that he is particularly interested in Levinas's response to "the question of the faulty text [*texte fautif*]," a text that consists in inscribing the other in the language of the same (ATVM: 149-51/165-66). Levinas's response, as we know, is to address his work to the Other in a Saying irreducible to the written word. He explains this in *Otherwise than Being* by stating that to the command of the Other only a "here I am" [*me voici*] can answer (OB: 144-152/225-38). This phrase has strong connotations with figures such as Abraham, Moses, and Isaiah from the Old Testament,<sup>61</sup> whose utterances of these words reveal to Levinas their unconditional responsiveness to the command of God: "Here I am, in the name of God" (OB: 149/233). The saying that orders me to the unsayable Other is, as Levinas admits, an "ambiguous or enigmatic way of speaking" (OB: 7/20); it is a "speaking so as to say nothing," "identified with nothing but the very voice that states and delivers itself" (OB: 143/223-25).

As already mentioned, Derrida is interested in how Levinas *writes* the saying, how the saying is necessarily *inscribed* into the said, and the havoc that the nonpresence of writing plays with the purity of the spoken word (ATVM: 149-150/165). He notices for instance that Levinas occasionally places quotation marks around the words "here I am," graphical markers that suggest that in those instances these words are not performed or used in "speech acts," but rather appear to be cited or thematized as something "mentioned" in general (ATVM: 152/168). In this manner of writing "here I am," the absolutely unique and irreplaceable present—what Derrida calls the "I-now-here [*je-maintenant-ici*] of the sriptor" (ATVM: 157/173)—is allowed to be iterated, multiplied, and displaced from one context, author, or moment to a completely different one (for example in the title: "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I am").

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<sup>61</sup> Respectively, *Genesis* 22:11; *Exodus* 3:4; *Isaiah* 6:8.

The strange consequence is that it is no longer certain who says “here I am,” who is responsible as the author of the text. It is in the interval or hiatus created by the withdrawal of the nominative “I” (in French, *me voici* is in the accusative) that you, the other, have a chance to speak. What you says is that “another language comes to disturb [*déranger*] the first one”:

Another text, the text of the other, without ever appearing in its original language [*langue*], arrives in silence [*vient alors en silence*] with a more or less regular cadence to dislocate [*disloquer*] the language of translation, to convert the version, turn it inside out [*la retourner*], bend it to the very thing it [*elle*] pretends to import. (ATVM: 152-53/168)

If the “first language,” the one of saying “here I am,” comes from Levinas or male Biblical figures, then whence comes the “other language”? As you, feminine other point out, in the same line from which Derrida earlier quoted the words “here I am” between quotation marks in *Otherwise than Being*, there also appears a footnote to another text (ATVM: 151/166-67; OB: 141-42/221-22). This other text is the *Song of Songs*, a Biblical dialogue between two anonymous lovers. In the specific line that the footnote references—“I am sick with love” (OB: 198n.5/222n.1; from *Song of Songs* 6:8)—the female lover voices her suffering caused by the insatiable desire to give herself to the other. Unforeseen by Levinas, then, in this chance contact with another text (i.e. quotation, citation, translation), the purity of the saying “here I am” is contaminated by an unnamed “she”:<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> To explain a bit better the connection between (the masculine) saying “here I am” and the silent feminine, let me summarize the (quite lengthy) section that Derrida quotes from *Otherwise than Being* and its surrounding pages. It is an interesting passage where Levinas at once speaks of the irreplaceable responsibility of the subject—“where one cannot have oneself be replaced without fault,” a “restlessness” [*inquiétude*] for the other, which also “is the impossibility of being silent”; and of the substitution of “the-one-for-the-other” and the gestation of the other in the same (OB: 141-42/221-22, 143/224). Levinas says that “Here I am” is “saying with inspiration,” a trauma of the psyche, “a constraint to corporality,” the unavoidable “assignation to respond” (OB: 141-42/221-22). Earlier (section 3.1.), we have seen that “bearing,” “substitution,” “corporality,” “psychosis,” “assignation,” “inspiration,” and “restlessness” are all characteristics of maternity or the female lover (OB: 75-81/120-29). He also says of this “unheard-of saying” [*dire inouï*], “saying without said” [Dire sans dit], “without dialogue” (OB: 145/226, 149/232, 151/237), that it requires incessantly and from the first the “correction” and “betrayal” of human fraternity or “illeity”: the movement toward plurality in which the saying “is fixed in a said, is written, becomes a book, law and science” (OB: 158-59/246-47). A trace of the feminine—silent, faulty, and “sick with love”—is thus retained in philosophical discourse, famously conceived by Levinas as “the wisdom of love at the service of love” (OB: 162/253).



*Il ou elle*, he or she, if the interruption of the discourse is required? Isn't it "she" in the *Song of Songs*? And who would "she" [*elle*] be? Does it matter? Is it EL? Emmanuel Levinas? God? (ATVM: 152/168; see also next section)

That this "she" "arrives in silence" can then be interpreted in two ways: (1) "she" arrives in the silent interval created by the withdrawal of the speaking subject; (2) "she" arrives without speaking, inaudible, without saying "here I am." Instead, "she" "haunts" the dominating discourse through citation and translation (ATVM: 152-53/168-69), and "she" arrives without having announced herself or given her consent: the sentence is "torn [*s'arrache*] from the mouth of a woman, so as to be given to the other. Why doesn't he specify that in this work?" (ATVM: 153/169).<sup>63</sup>

Resuming your interruption, Derrida says about this final, somewhat indignant question, directed at the irresponsibility of the author and the neglect toward the feminine bearer, that it "remains, in this context and with regard to his most urgent purpose, secondary," and that "he doesn't seem to respond" to it (ATVM: 153/169). The accent in Levinas is on giving rather than receiving, on speaking rather than listening, on engendering rather than being engendered. So even though the language of the other—which "is no longer *said in language*," but "not reduced to silence" either—will have "put out of joint" [*disloqué*] the language of the same, "it [*elle*] continues speaking; it can't help it, it can only continue strangely interrupting itself, dumbstruck [*interloquée*] by what traverses it at a single step, drawing it along behind while leaving it in place [*la laissant sur place*]" (ATVM: 154/169).

#### 4.2.4. *Your gift to him*

The third interruption comes significantly later on in the text. What you previously succeeded in showing is that Levinas's work is not entirely *his*; what he says does not come from him, but is

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<sup>63</sup> Levinas says that the one who says "here I am" is "a being torn up from oneself for another in the giving to the other of the bread out of one's own mouth" [*arrachement-à-soi-pour-un-autre dans le donner-à-l'autre-le-pain-de-sa-bouche*] (OB: 142/222).

already a response to other languages preceding and coming from outside his work. This will have rendered ambivalent any grammar that presents Levinas as the unique subject of his work, phrases such as “at this very moment,” “this book,” or “the present work” (ATVM: 168-69/183-84). So when Derrida next quotes a passage from *Otherwise than Being* where Levinas *again* uses the words “in this work,” you interpose the question: “Will it be said of ‘this work’ [*ouvrage*] that it makes a work [*oeuvre*]? From which moment? Of what? Of whom?” (ATVM: 171/185). But you are not content with just asking this question—this time you also give your own answer.

Significant at this point is a variety of metonymic links that Derrida playfully draws between the proper name of Emmanuel Levinas, or rather the initials “EL” with which he would sign his work, and the French male and female pronouns “il” and “elle,” which are naturally repeated everywhere throughout their works.<sup>64</sup> Leading up to your intervention is a quote from the very final words of *Otherwise than Being* that states that any work that would be signed with a proper name so as to protect the author’s possession over his work, is pre-signed or pre-sealed by the “Pro-noun” [*Pro-nom*; pre-name] “il,” so as to mark its original lostness in the anonymous third (*illeity*) (ATVM: 170/185; OB: 185/284). Previously, you established that since “the presumed signatory, EL, does not directly say I in the text,” the text might be countersigned by another, represented not by the pronoun “il,” but by an anonymous “she” [*elle*] (ATVM: 154/170). What seems to be implied is a disruption in the continuity of the same between the male proper name of Emmanuel Levinas and the male pronoun “il,” or between the individual and the plural, self and others.

Despite the movement of the nominal toward the pronominal, you wonder if it is not Emmanuel Levinas who authored this very movement; it is still Levinas who *says* the pronoun “he,”<sup>65</sup> and who signs with his proper name the discourse that replaces and effaces his nominal signature. Thus: “By the same double stroke, he gives to it and withdraws from it his signature” (ATVM: 171/185). What difference does it make then if the work is signed with a pronoun or a proper name? You remark that “whatever the relays may be, the responsibility comes back

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<sup>64</sup> Another link is to one of the names of God, which is El or Eloha in Hebrew. See NG: 118/158.

<sup>65</sup> Or rather, Levinas quotes and copies this saying from the Talmudic tradition, where, according to his interpretation, “He” is both the effacement of the Name of God and the preservation of God’s transcendence: “And it is without doubt this essential ambiguity—or enigma—of transcendence that is preserved in the standard expression in the Talmud for designating God: ‘The Holy One, blessed be He [*Le Saint béni-soit-il*]’” (NG: 122/161).

[*revient*] to him, ‘he’ [*il*], who *undersigns* [*soussigne*] every signature” (ATVM: 171/185). You therefore say, “I do not think that between some pro-noun or other and a name or the bearer of a name there is what is called a difference or a distinction” (ATVM: 171/185). Since the pronoun “he” never refers to an impersonal nothingness, but always to the bearer of a name, which it replaces but not effaces, it should always be possible that “he” can refer back to Levinas (ATVM: 174/188). Based on these considerations, you decide to make the following suggestion:

If I now transform the utterance that came from I know not where and from which we took our point of departure (“He will have obligated”) by this one, “the work of Emmanuel Levinas will have obligated,” would he subscribe to that [*y souscrirait-il*]? Would he accept my replacing “he” by Emmanuel Levinas in order to say what or who will have made the work in his work? Would it be a fault as regards “he” [*il*] or as regards him, EL? (ATVM: 171/185)

What is happening here is more remarkable than it might seem. In taking it upon yourself, feminine reader, to replace the anonymous pronoun “he” with the proper name Emmanuel Levinas, what you do basically, is *giving the work to him*. What we thus see take place in this part of the text is nothing less than a gift from the reader to the author, the other inventing the same, or the daughter questioning the father.

After this interruption, Derrida accepts your gift by saying: “Now, I write at your dictation, ‘the work of EL will have obligated’” (ATVM: 171/186). This signature—EL—playfully fuses the name of Emmanuel Levinas, the anonymous “il,” and your “countersignature” “elle,” rendering ambivalent who wrote it. However, although you now answer for the work that comes from you, you have not taken over yet. Your gift is still a return gift, a restoration of the lost proper name (Emmanuel Levinas), and your faulty writing still requires his authoritative consent—“would he subscribe to that?”

#### 4.2.5. *Lectrice becomes autrice*

This changes by the time of the fourth interruption, which is the most extensive by far. The takeover is as complete as it will get and your relation to the texts of Levinas and Derrida now becomes clear. After a series of interruptions, you finally are able to say, “I come then to my question” (ATVM: 183/197). The questions that you proceed to ask are about Levinas’s relation to the feminine, the very ones discussed in section 3.2. An important point that I did not highlight then is revealed in this part of the text, one that is as remarkable as it is easy to overlook: the questions about the masculine mark of Levinas’s works, his “mastery of femininity,” and the daughter as the other child, all come from *you*! It is not Derrida, then, the presumed male author of the text, but *the feminine other herself* who, making full use of the grammatical form of the first person singular present, interrogates Levinas on sexual difference and feminine alterity.

How are we to gauge this strange event where a feminine other speaks for herself and about herself within a text seemingly written by a male author for another male author? Does this mean that you can now speak freely without obligation, responsibility, or risk? What made this possible, and what difference does it make to the text?

Although it can be said that the questions that you ask come from you, it is not your initiative that gave rise to them; they follow a call from Derrida. Although his appeal to you is barely pronounced and hardly obligating—a parenthetical “(come)” (ATVM: 178/192)—it still suggests that you are only able to speak because *he lets you speak* (rather than letting be; cf. 4.2.2.). As Derrida points out, the French word *laisser* (“to let”) also means “to leave” (in the sense of “to leave behind” or “to abandon”) (ATVM: 175-77/189-91), an ambivalence that suggests that the coming of the other is only made possible by the effacement of the same. Just as important as the call for the other is the withdrawal of the speaker to become a silent, listening other.<sup>66</sup> This is made apparent when *you*, lectrice/autrice (and thus not Derrida), quote from “Violence and Metaphysics” (i.e. the footnote discussed in section 3.2.) in a manner unlike what one would expect from an author referring to his own text. The words are quoted as though they come from

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<sup>66</sup> Cf. “A Word of Welcome,” where Derrida puts this into practice at the beginning of his talk on Levinas. He says, “I agreed to be the first to speak so as, of course, to take part in this homage, something I deeply wished to do, but also so as to efface myself as quickly as possible on the threshold of hospitality. I hoped then to be able to remain silent, protected by this alibi—and especially to listen.” In *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 18-19.

someone else, from another time and another place: “as was elsewhere noted, ‘in passing,’ a long time ago by another [*un autre*]” (ATVM: 180/193).

Knowing that you are only *let* to speak by the withdrawal of another speaker, or the effacement of another discourse, you are still called the “obligated feminine reader” [*lectrice obligée*] (ATVM: 178/192). Your response and questions are only made possible by his work, follow it, and respond to it from within. However, your words also make it clear that *preceding* the saying that delivers his work over to the other, and *preceding* the said that reties this saying into a discourse of the same, you were already there. In “listening” [*en écoutant*] and in “reading” [*lisant*] you were never absent from the interrupted work. “Writing the text from its other side” is you, or “She who would be the wholly other” (ATVM: 184/198). This relation does not come from you as it would have come from him, and you are not there to replace or to substitute him: “it is not a matter of reversing places and, contrary to him, putting woman in the place of the wholly other as archē” (ATVM: 184-85/198). And yet, what you seem to want to remind Levinas of (and other philosophers that seek to “desexualize the relation to the wholly other”), is the *relation* with sexual difference “as femininity” that is written in the intervals of the language beyond sexual difference: “their relation to me, to the other as woman. That is what I would like to give them (first of all to read)” (ATVM: 183-84/197).

However, in this *contact* of the other with the same, the work of Levinas will also have carried the contaminating fault over to you. In saying what his work cannot and should not say—the (unsayable feminine) Other—you are repeating its faults. In erasing and unsaying the faulty saying, you cannot but keep it: “Let’s accept it: what I am writing at this very moment is faulty [*reste faux*]” (ATVM: 185/198):

The fault will have always, already, taken place: as soon as I thematize what, in his work, carries beyond the thematizable... I am contaminating this irrepressible thematization in my turn... just as much with a fault of my own. (ATVM: 187/200)

In other words, the masculine discourse of Levinas and the silent feminine other are from the very beginning in a mutually contaminating relationship that allows neither assimilation nor dissociation. In order to efface the said and dislocate the dominating discourse from the position

of unsayable other, the other cannot but have obligated her own silent otherness and at once have betrayed this obligation. Hence your final question:

if it [*elle*] became, in the depths of the same, the other of his other, will I then have deformed his name by writing, at this moment, in this work, right here, 'it [*elle*; she] will have obligated?' (ATVM: 188/201)

Is it indeed deformed or was this already its form from the very first words? Is the promise made earlier—that you will listen to me (section 4.2.2.)—fulfilled at the end of the text?

#### 4.2.6. *Illegible writing and remainder*

One more time the text changes its voice, but it appears there is not much left to say but the following:

I no longer know if you are saying what his work says. Perhaps it comes back and comes down [*revient*] to the same. I no longer know if you are saying the contrary, or if you have already written something wholly other. I no longer hear your voice, I have difficulty distinguishing [*distingue mal*] it from mine, from any other, your fault suddenly becomes illegible to me. Interrupt me. (ATVM: 188/201)

This final passage seems to signal neither a return to the same nor a saying wholly otherwise, but the inability to tell the difference between the two. At this point, it no longer is possible to hear and understand individual voices, because they are no longer pure or can no longer be separated from one another, but have fused into a single illegible, faulty writing. It is difficult to distinguish oppositions between same and other, gift and response, author and reader, speaking and listening.

At this point, the series of interruptions that are woven into "At This Very Moment" seems to cease. However, rather than bringing it to a conclusion, it ends in a deadlock. The

interrupting discourse of the other has become indistinguishable from the dominating discourse of the same. It is no longer possible to say if “At This Very Moment” is responding otherwise to the works of Levinas or if it is repeating and continuing its faults. The aporia is insoluble in a single response, even if that response is riveted into multiple voices. There is only a limited number of interruptions that can be inscribed in any given text. If interruptions are to remain numerous, then they will have to be numerous beyond the boundaries or borders of Derrida’s text as well.

This seems to be the reason why the series of interruptions ends with a call for more interruptions. But can we know who says “interrupt me”? Who or what is to be interrupted? Is it Derrida’s interruption of Levinas that must in turn be interrupted? Is it Levinas who was the first to say “interrupt me” in a saying that still awaits interruption? Is it the unsayable, silent, feminine other who betrayed herself in revealing herself who must now be interrupted? And interrupted by whom? To whom is this appeal addressed? Who remains outside everything that has been said, who can hear this call, and interrupt all these discourses? Is there a remainder?

Levinas, wary about the possibility of a conclusion or closure to philosophical discourse in which beginning and end come full circle, said in (and about) *Otherwise than Being*: “is not its interruption its only possible end?” (OB: 20/39). In the above we have examined interruptions that are not endings, or endings otherwise than interruption. That is my interpretation why following the final “interrupt me” there remains one more highly enigmatic passage in “At This Very Moment,” written in one continuous flow, entirely in capitalized letters, and without proper punctuation. This section falls outside the series of interruptions that make up “At This Very Moment,” while also being undeniably part of this text. It is hard to tell who says what to whom in this remainder. On a later occasion, Derrida apparently responded vocally to a question put to him that this final passage is neither in the voice of the male nor in the female, but male and female have become mixed to form a single voice.<sup>67</sup> Critchley has suggested that these final words sound like a prayer, a liturgy, or a lament, cited at the funeral of a feminine body.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Chanter, “Antigone’s Dilemma,” 144n.10.

<sup>68</sup> Critchley, *Ethics of Deconstruction*, 140-41; see also Llewelyn, *Appositions*, 162.

I think it can also be read as a response to the question what remains of the faulty text; what can happen to it and what can remain of it (cited in the introduction).<sup>69</sup> If there is no interruption that can put an end to the texts of Levinas and Derrida, then they must remain, one faulty analysis followed and interrupted by another faulty analysis. Texts must be interrupted, but also kept and passed on so that a response remains always possible. I will only emphasize from this remaining passage in “At This Very Moment” that the body or corpus or manuscript that is rolled up, buried, and kept in these final pages is “perhaps” of a “mute” [*muet*], “stillborn” [*mort-née*], “infant girl” [*fille*]. Resembling “the proper body of the fault,” she is put in the earth, slowly decomposing, keeping herself and losing herself. Already she gives herself and “she lets herself be eaten” [*elle se laisse déjà manger*]. “She does not speak,” “the unnamed one” [*l’innommée*], and yet “you hear her” (ATVM: 188-90/201-202). Without a doubt there is a lot more that can be said or asked about these nearly illegible lines. Where to cut, what to quote, and where to weave in our interpretations?

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<sup>69</sup> A few pages earlier, Derrida referred to Levinas’s “The Name of God According to a Few Talmudic Texts” that is relevant in this context. Levinas observes that according to a long tradition of Talmudic textual criticisms, it is forbidden to say or thematize the unsayable name of God, but once the name of God is written, it is also forbidden to efface the name (NG: 118-22/157-61). Once a mistake is made in writing or copying the name of God, the manuscript has to be “buried like a dead body” [*mis en terre comme un corps mort*] (NG: 212n.3/157n.3). Derrida’s interpretation is that in such case the fault is not destroyed or lost without remainder; “at bottom one keeps it, as a fault, one keeps it at the bottom” (ATVM: 185/199). The analogy with *Otherwise than Being* is that to *keep* the other as other, one must efface the thematizing text, but not destroy it; one must *keep* it as a faulty remainder. The same goes for the text that copies and repeats the fault, even so as to efface or unsay it, such as would for example be the case with “At This Very Moment”; it too must be kept as a faulty remainder.



## Concluding remarks: a response to Derrida

Is “At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am” a text written by Derrida for Levinas? Is it Derrida’s gift to Levinas? A response to his works? I would say, perhaps. This unique text responds simultaneously to Levinas, to what he will have said in works such as *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, and to the Other, to what precedes and remains beyond these works, and remains still to come. It shows that the process in which one writes about the other and then have one’s discourse received and interrupted otherwise by the other, is not a straight movement without risks, but also not without chances and possibilities. It will therefore require more than a straightforward conclusion to do justice here both to Derrida’s meticulous reading of Levinas, his profound understanding of the consequences and assumptions that are at work in his works, and the unrelenting deconstruction of his own response to Levinas, the continuous play between opposing voices that opens the text from within.

Instead, maybe we can in turn ask a few questions about Derrida’s manner of writing “At This Very Moment,” about his two manners of writing at once, in multiple voices, languages, tongues, bodies, sexes, and moments, which drive the text onwards without leading it to a conclusion. He does not begin in identifying the mistakes in Levinas’s discourse and he does not end in having corrected or overcome them, but the same faults are repeated and altered from work to work. We will then be asking not how his writing succeeds, but how it fails (and not even how it succeeds in failing). This conclusion will then not be summarizing Derrida’s accomplishments or contributions, but his faults and shortcomings. Here then is my question:

How does Derrida respond to Levinas while simultaneously also listening to the other? How does he let himself be continuously interrupted by other voices while never ceasing to continue to speak himself? Are we not duped by some strategic ruse? Is Derrida not still the one and only author of “At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am”? Is it not he, and only *he*, who allows you to speak in his text, and who dictates what you will have said? Is the text really dictated by you and is it really you who writes it, or is not the whole choreography of multiple voices entirely Derrida’s work? Did his gift to you and your usurpation of the text really happen through the interruptions that are threaded into his discourse? Or did it all took place as monologue, as

an internal discussion, a reflexive discourse, orchestrated by a single master mind? Would it not all come down to the same again? Is this not a risk that we must accept?

Throughout my reading of "At This Very Moment," I have explored multiple interpretations of the phrase "(the work of) il/elle/EL/Emmanuel Levinas will have obligated." In the following, I want to propose one more reading, one more name, one that Derrida does not mention, namely: Elijah (Élie in French). In "Judaism and the Feminine Element," Levinas concluded about messianic time that "neither wife nor sister nor mother guides it," but that instead Elijah guides it (JFE: 37-38/56-57). Elijah is the prophet who escaped death and is to come again, and is linked through messianic time to the coming of the other. Interestingly, Elijah is also another name given to Derrida, as he revealed elsewhere: "you would not believe me if I told you that I too am called Elijah: this name is not inscribed, no, on my official documents, but it was given me on my seventh day."<sup>70</sup> Will it then be possible to read or write the phrase "the work of il/elle/EL/Emmanuel Levinas will have obligated" as "the work of Elijah will have obligated," or "the work of Jacques Derrida will have obligated"?

What remains, then, are the faulty works of Levinas and Derrida. One cannot efface or recuperate these faulty writings, not without repeating their faults and spreading them further. However, if Derrida in his turn repeats the fault in tying multiple interruptions into his text, his own interruption and the interruptions of the Other, thereby appropriating them and assuming them under his authorial signature, despite himself and preceding any intention or desire, he will also have made possible a wholly different reading of the works of Levinas. This, then, will have been his gift to Levinas and to you.

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<sup>70</sup> Derrida, "Ulysses Gramophone," 284; see also Derrida, "Circonfession," 80-83.

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