

Embodying “you”: Levinas and a question of the second person

CARROL CLARKSON

Abstract

In this paper I examine the effects of considering Levinas’s philosophy of the relation to the Other as a relation to a second person “you,” rather than to a third person “he.” To think of the Other as “you” sheds further light on the ethical encounter that Levinas terms the “Saying:” it provokes us to think of the event of reading a literary text as an event of the Saying. In the dynamic potential of the literary text to instantiate an “I” and a “you” (which is to say, an addresser and an addressee) each time it is read, and in ways that cannot be exhaustively predicted or epistemologically saturated in advance, the artwork effects an open yet responsive encounter with the Other.

1. Levinas and “you”, the Other

The French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, is preoccupied with the ethical relation of self to other. His writing hinges on a diction of the third person, of “il” (he), “l’autre” (the other) and “l’autrui” (the other person, others – or as it is most frequently translated – the Other). In this paper, however, I examine the effects of considering aspects of Levinas’s thinking as a philosophy of a relation to the *second* person (in the grammatical sense), rather than to the third person. To think of the Other as “you,” this paper argues, is to understand more clearly some of the subtleties of Levinas’s notion of the ethical encounter in what he terms the “Saying.” Further, thinking of the Other as “you” provokes us to reconsider the event in the “Saying” as an event of reading a literary text. This may come as a surprize, especially given Levinas’s notorious argument in “Reality and Its Shadow,” namely, that art, in its immobilizing of time, constitutes an irresponsible evasion of the world. A reading of Levinas’s essay on the poetry of Paul Celan, however, reveals that Levinas’s ethical relation can be understood to be instantiated in each encounter with a literary text.

In order to take full cognizance of the event of literature as an event of the Saying, it is necessary, first of all, to make some rather intricate linguistic distinctions – with special reference to the grammar of pronouns. When dealing with pronominal forms such as “I”, “you” and “he,” the question that most readily arises is, to whom do these pronouns refer? That is to say, which referents are in question? In this paper, though, the question becomes one of *how* these terms refer: the philosophical grammar of “I”, “you” and “he,” will be shown to shed unexpected light on Levinasian ethics.

Pronominal forms are what Roman Jakobson (following Otto Jespersen 1922) calls “shifters:” the referent in each instance of use is different, instantiated by the context of the utterance. But Jakobson goes on to make a further subtle distinction; a distinction between the *speech* event, with addresser and addressee, and the *narrated* event – the “content” of the speech event (Jakobson 1990: 390). It is through this distinction that the different grammatical operations of “I” and “you” on the one hand, and “he” or “she” on the other hand, become clear. “I” and “you” refer to the addresser and the addressee of the *speech* event (see Jakobson 1990: 388), but “he” refers to a participant in the *narrated* event. Whereas “you” are always instantiated as present to my utterance, I can refer to “him” in his absence. The linguist, Emile Benveniste, states the matter clearly with respect to “I” and “you”: “I is ‘the individual who utters the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance *I*.’” Similarly, “you [is] the ‘individual spoken to in the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance *you*.’” (Benveniste 1971: 218). Further, pronominal forms such as “I” and “you” “do not refer to ‘reality’ or to ‘objective’ positions in space or time *but to the utterance, unique each time*, that contains them, and thus they reflect their proper use” (Benveniste 1971: 219, my emphasis). In the chapter, “Subjectivity in Language,” Benveniste takes the matter even further:

Then, what does *I* refer to? To something very peculiar which is exclusively linguistic: *I* refers to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker. It is a term that cannot be identified except in what we have called elsewhere an instance of discourse and that has only a momentary reference. The reality to which it refers is the reality of the discourse. (Benveniste 1971: 226)

The implications of Benveniste’s claims here are several: in order for the “I” and the “you” of the speech event to be actualized, a certain presence of the addressee to the discourse is required. Differently put, an address to you requires your presence to the discourse in order for that address to take effect.¹ In that the utterance is “unique each time,” “you” cannot be definitively limited, in an *a priori* way, by the intention or by the epistemological compass of the “I.” You, whom my address anticipates, can be activated at an infinite number of different sites and future instances of address – you are at once anonymous, singular and infinite. Again following Benveniste, the signs “I” and “you” are “always

available and become ‘full’ [let us say, *embodied*] as soon as a speaker introduces them into each instance of his discourse” (Benveniste 1971: 219). To reiterate, but now with a slightly different emphasis, these signs “cannot exist as potentialities; they exist only insofar as they are actualized in the instance of discourse” (Benveniste 1971: 220).

But “you” signals a curious type of embodiment: you, the referent, are simultaneously embodied and suspended in this sign.² My address ineluctably anticipates a “you,” but the moment I ask the question, “Who are you?” and try to pin you down in your name, you shift your grammatical position, and occupy the place of a third person. In your name, or as a third person, you need not be present to my utterance, to my *speech* event, but “you,” the second person, are obliged to be in the presence of this very discourse. At the site of a proper name,³ in the grammatical position of the third person, the “you” would become a referent in a *narrated* event. To stay “you,” without becoming a specified third person, you have to remain infinitely beyond my epistemological reach, anonymous, *at the same time* that you are singularly instantiated, in each instance, in the “presence” of my discourse.

Now the way in which I have been speaking about “you” surely reminds you of Levinas’s evocation of what he calls the Other in the interlocutory event of the Saying: “Our relation with the other (*autrui*) certainly consists in wanting to comprehend him, but this relation overflows comprehension” (Levinas 1996a: 6) and

The relation with the other (*autrui*) is not therefore ontology. This tie to the other (*autrui*) ... does not reduce itself to the representation of the Other (*autrui*) but rather to his invocation, where invocation is not preceded by comprehension. (Levinas 1996a: 7)

Like “you,” of whom I spoke earlier, Levinas’s Other exceeds my cognitive grasp and is not reducible to thematization within an epistemological compass – which is to say, in Levinas’s terms, that the Other is not reducible to the Same. Further, Levinas alerts us to the implications of trying to stabilize and contain the referents of pronominal signs within the horizon of an attempt to know:

If the question “who?” tends to discover the situation of the subject, that is, the place of a person in a conjuncture, a conjunction of beings and things – or if it consists in asking, as Plato puts it in the *Phaedrus* ... “who is it?” “from what land does he come?” – then the question “who?” asks about being. Such a “who?” amounts to a “what?,” to “what about him?” (Levinas 1981: 27).

In the passage I have just cited, the voice of Martin Buber reverberates, except that Buber uses the term, “You,” where Levinas insists on the term, “Other” – here is Martin Buber:

I do not find the human being to whom I say You in any Sometime and Somewhere. I can place him there and have to do this again and again, but immediately he becomes a He or a She, an It, and no longer remains my You (Buber 1970: 59).

Further on, Buber elaborates: “Only as things cease to be our You and become our It do they become subject to coordination. The You knows no system of coordinates” (Buber 1970: 81). It is specifically in this context that Levinas cites Buber approvingly: “[t]he relation to the other man is irreducible to the knowledge of an object,” says Levinas in an interview with François Poirié, “This is certainly a terrain of reflection where Buber has been before me ... the interpersonal relation is distinguished from the object relation in a very convincing and brilliant way, and with much finesse” (Levinas and Poirié 2001: 72).

2. The Saying and the Said

A face-to-face encounter with the Other, the Saying in Levinas, is a performative interlocutionary event that is to be carefully distinguished from the constative communication that Levinas locates in the Said.⁴ In other words, Levinas’s Saying can be loosely linked to Jakobson’s “speech event,” and the Said to the “narrated event.” It is a logic of this sort that Levinas attempts to articulate in *Totality and Infinity*. The Saying is the irrecuperable event of the address; the Said is the retrospective assimilation of that event:

The relation proceeding from me to the other [in the Saying] cannot be included within a network of relations visible to a third party. If this bond between me and the other could be entirely apprehended from the outside it would suppress, under the gaze that encompassed it, the very multiplicity bound with this bond ... I have access to the alterity of the Other from the society I maintain with him, and not by quitting this relation in order to reflect on its terms. (Levinas 1991: 121)

Yet the distinction between the Saying and the Said is one of vertiginous subtlety, as we learn from the Levinas of *Otherwise than Being*. The Saying is

[a]ntecedent to the verbal signs it conjugates, to the linguistic systems and the semantic glimmerings, a foreword preceding languages, it is the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other ... (Levinas 1981: 5)

If the Saying precedes and is antecedent to verbal signs, in its invocation of an addressee, it is nevertheless an *interlocutionary* event, a “foreword,” an orientation of addresser to addressee. This is clearer in the original French text – “avant-propos des langues” (Levinas 1974: 6) could be translated as “foreword of languages” rather than as “foreword *preceding* languages” (as it is in the English publication). Elsewhere Levinas writes in ways which emphasize the linguistic underpinnings of an encounter with the other, “To be in relation with the other (*autrui*) face to face ... is ... the situation of discourse” (Levinas 1996a: 9), and “I think that the first language is the *response*” (Levinas et al. 1988: 174, my emphasis). Of course, it is the performative fact of the speech event itself, rather than its subsumptive content, that takes priority:

Should language be thought uniquely as the communication of an idea or as information, and not also – *and perhaps above all* – as the fact of encountering the other as other, that is to say, already as a response to him? (Levinas and Poirié 2001: 47, Levinas’s emphasis)

In yet another interview, Levinas states the matter deftly, and with even greater clarity: “Language is above all the fact of being addressed ... which means the saying much more than the said” (Levinas 1988 et al.: 170). Thus the Saying, even while it is associated with the ethical in Levinas, is also always a *linguistic* event. Language is the common denominator of the Said *and* the Saying: “language as *saying* is an ethical openness to the other, as that which is *said* – reduced to a fixed or synchronized presence – it is an ontological closure to the other” (Levinas and Kearney 1986: 29).

By now at least this much should be clear: Levinas locates his face to face encounter in the Saying, in what Jakobson might call the speech event. Further, Levinas insists upon the priority of the *performative force* of the Saying before any communicated content or discursive theme. A subjective assimilation of thematized concepts, for Levinas, is part of the Said – or, to put it in Jakobson’s terms, part of the narrated event.

But here is the difficulty: in the first part of this paper, following Benveniste and Jakobson, I aligned the performative *speech* event with the pronominal forms I and you, and the constative *narrated* event with the third person pronouns, he, she or it. Now Levinas’s Saying seems to fulfil the conditions of a *speech* event, and yet he insists on speaking of the face to face encounter as an invocation of a third person “il” (“he”), rather than of a second person “you.” This can catch one unawares, since, as I have already intimated, it is a “you,” rather than a “he” that is necessarily instantiated, each time, as a singularity – through the logical grammar of the address or invocation. Why, then, does Levinas relentlessly speak of a third person, when the performative instantiation of a singular and infinite “you” in each instance of discourse is arguably more congruent with his account of the Saying? The reasons are as wide-ranging as they are subtle.

Most importantly (if also somewhat ironically), Levinas explicitly refutes the diction of the second person when distancing himself from the philosophy of Martin Buber.⁵ Levinas repeatedly voices his opposition to Buber on the grounds that the latter’s “I-Thou” relation is one of reciprocity, that the relation is self-sufficient and intimate to the extent that it excludes any social responsibility to the rest of the world (See, for example, *Totality and Infinity*, 68–69; 213; 265). Certainly, there is much in Buber to support such a reading: “relation is reciprocity” says Buber (1970: 58), and “When one says You, the I of the word-pair I-You is said, too” (Buber 1970: 54). Further, in Buber, the relation to “you” seems to affirm the “I:” “I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You” (Buber 1970: 62). It is through this affirmation of the subjective, conscious I that the “you” in Buber is read as a “theme” by Levinas (Levinas 1981: 12–

13). The relation to the Other in Levinas, if anything, has the opposite effect – it amounts to a de-substantiation of the I, even a substitution of the one for the other. The “il,” or “illeity,” as Levinas would have it, “indicates a way of concerning me without entering into conjunction with me” (Levinas 1981: 12). The tacit implication here is that Buber’s I-thou relation *is* one of conjunction.

Nevertheless, Levinas’s relation to Buber is by no means straightforward; and Levinas’s take on reciprocity, for example, might have been different, had he read the afterword to *I and Thou* which Buber wrote in 1957.⁶ Buber’s “reciprocity” does not entail psychological mutuality, as he elucidates in the afterword. “Reciprocity” subtends relations “outside of the tamed circle” (Buber 1970: 172); we can say You (in Buber’s sense) not only to humans and to other animals, but to plants and even to the inanimate world. It is a relation that “reaches from the stones to the stars” – it is a “reciprocity that has nothing except being” (Buber 1970: 173).⁷

To return more specifically to the question of pronouns, though, it seems to me that it is Levinas’s failure to take due cognizance of the logical performative operation of the second person *linguistically*, together with his wish to distance himself from Buber’s I-thou relation, that accounts (at least in part) for his preference for the vocabulary of the third person, rather than that of the second. More generally, Levinas’s inattention to linguistic performatives leads to his blanket distinction between proper names on the one hand, and personal pronouns on the other, without his taking heed of the implications of the different subject positions that can be occupied in the first, second and third persons through pronouns *and* through proper names. Yet once we remind ourselves that “you” and “I” are instantiated *in relation to the utterance*; that any presence “you” might have is a unique but infinitely iterable presence to the discourse, rather than to the speaker, then Levinas’s reasons for not using a second person “you,” and the charges he levels at Buber (of knowing intimacy, of reciprocity between you and I), seem to me to fall away.

For Levinas (as we have seen), language itself can be an instance of the Said – “reduced to a fixed or synchronized presence ... an ontological closure to the other” – *or* it can be an instance of the Saying – “an ethical openness to the other” (Levinas and Kearney 1986: 29). The point I wish to develop now is this: a reading of “Reality and Its Shadow” alongside the essay, “Paul Celan: From being to the Other,” invites the application of Levinas’s dual understanding of language to the domain of the literary work. That is to say, the literary text, in Levinas’s own terms, can be regarded as either an instance of the Said, or as an ethical event of the Saying.

3. The poem as across time, moving towards a “utopia”

In “Reality and Its Shadow” (first published in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1948), Levinas reads the artwork as “a stoppage of time;” “every artwork is in the end a statue,” he says (Levinas 1989: 137), and he goes on to elaborate:

Within the life, or rather the death, of a statue, an instant endures infinitely ... the Mona Lisa will smile eternally ... An eternally suspended future floats around the congealed position of a statue like a future forever to come. The imminence of the future lasts before an instant stripped of the essential characteristic of the present, its evanescence. (Levinas 1989: 138)

The essay reiterates the notion that art freezes time: time is “immobilized” (139), “suspended” (138), “congealed” (138). The artist “transform[s] time into images” (139), and effects “petrification” (140), “fixity” (139), “death” (138). The characters represented lead “a lifeless life, a derisory life which is not master of itself, a caricature of life” (138). The “power of freedom congeals into impotence” (139). Characters are “shut up, prisoners” (139), and this is not because the artist or writer “*represents* being crushed by fate – beings enter their fate *because they are represented*” (139, my emphasis). Of course, given his emphasis that the effect of the artwork is to arrest time, Levinas is committed to the view that art (within the context of his own understanding of ethics) constitutes an irresponsible relation to the Other: the ethical relation *cedes* the time of the Other, without assimilating or synchronizing alterity within the present structures of the Same.⁸ Further, given this disengagement from real time, from “a world of initiative and responsibility,” Levinas sees in the artwork “a dimension of evasion” (141), and “irresponsibility” (142):

The poet exiles himself from the city. From this point of view, the value of the beautiful is relative. There is something wicked and cowardly and egoist in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during the plague. (142)

Much of the discussion in “Reality and Its Shadow” has to do with the artist’s relation to the characters represented within the artwork – which is to say that the conversation takes place at the level of the thematizing mechanisms of the Said. But in his essay on the poetry of Paul Celan (first published in 1975), Levinas turns his attention to the logic of literary address itself, before exploring any subsumptive content. Here the accent falls on the relation of the writer to the reader, rather than to the characters represented, and in this context, it is possible to see the literary work as instantiating an event of the Saying, which is not reducible to the Said. Levinas (via Celan) foregrounds the dynamic positionings of addresser and addressee (loosely, the poet and the reader) in relation to the *event* of reading/writing the poem. Studying Levinas’s essay with Benveniste in mind, we are now in a position to understand the interlocutors of the Saying as being “present” to a discourse – the literary text. Nevertheless, within this gram-

mar of address, it is crucial to realize that Levinas still uses the *vocabulary* of a third person “Other,” while claiming for this Other the linguistic operations that I have shown (thanks to Benveniste) belong rightly to the second person.

Levinas’s essay constitutes a meditation on a comment Celan made in one of his letters: “I cannot see any basic difference between a handshake and a poem,” (Celan 1986a: 26). In his essay, Levinas speaks about the event of the poem in exactly the same terms that he uses to speak about the Saying elsewhere in his writings. He speaks of the poem as a “saying” a “fact of speaking to the other [that] precedes all thematization” (Levinas 1996b: 44). Further, poems are “important by their interpellation rather than by their message; important by their attention!” (Levinas 1996b: 43). It is here that we see most clearly Levinas’s account of the aporetic nature of the embodiment of the addressee. Thus, following Celan,

the poem is situated precisely at that pre-syntactic and ... pre-logical level, but a level also pre-disclosing: at the moment of pure touching, pure contact, grasping, squeezing – which is, perhaps, a way of giving ... A language of proximity for proximity’s sake, older than that of “the truth of being” ... the first of the languages, response preceding the question, responsibility for the neighbor, by its *for the other*, the whole marvel of giving. (Levinas 1996b: 41)

If, on the one hand, you, the addressee, are a tangible physical presence to the poem, the poem itself constitutes a movement towards a null-site, a *utopia*, with all the etymological history of *utopia* (from the Greek *not + place*) in force. Thus, in the teeth of a palpable physical contact, the question “where?” evaporates. Like Buber’s “Thou” (which Celan, incidentally, explicitly evokes), the movement of the poem, as an infinitely re-iterable invocation of an unknowable “you,” is not subject to a system of co-ordinates of latitude and longitude, neither is it restricted to one moment in history. This is because “you” and “I” function in precisely the same way as other deictics, such as “now” and “here” do: “now” can happen on any *date*; “here” can be any *place*. If “you” and “I” are present to this *utterance*, then you and I, too, are not anchored to a time or a place outside of this very situation of address. You are in a certain way, “freed and vacant,” as Levinas puts it (1996b: 41); “you” are constituted precisely in your diachronous relation to the lyric “I”, in ways that render the questions “who” and “where?” completely off the mark. In the intricate language of Celan’s essay, “The Meridian,” the poem, as a simultaneous response to and invocation of *you* (that is, the sign that is infinitely open to being “filled” in a unique way each time) – the poem

holds its ground on its own margin. In order to endure, it constantly calls and pulls itself back from an “already-no-more” into a “still-here” (Celan 1986b: 49).

This is a far cry from the immobilizing of time that Levinas attributes to the artwork in general in “Reality and Its Shadow.” Through his response to the

writings of Celan, Levinas perceives the poem as a movement towards a "utopia" – in the sense, too, that it cannot be synchronized or assimilated within a static instant in time or space. This null-site of the literary text is thus ineluctably an instantiation of you and I – but with no reference to the map or the clock or the sovereign self. It is a null-site "[o]utside all enrootedness and all dwelling." Such is the meridian movement of the lyric "I":

It is as if in going toward the other [ie. "you"] I met myself and implanted myself in a land, henceforth native, and I were stripped of all the weight of my identity. A native land owing nothing to enrootedness, nothing to first occupation; a native land owing nothing to birth. (Levinas 1996b: 44–45)

Further, the event of the poem, far from stabilizing the historical identity of the poet, projects a lyric "I" infinitely into new situations of address, into new I-you relations. Each lyric utterance is thus a "singular de-substantiation of the *I*" (Levinas 1996b: 43), as much as it is an *instantiation* of that I. It is in this de-substantiation of the I that responsibility (in Levinas's understanding of the term as a self-substitution) is mobilized: "The responsibility for the other is the locus in which is situated the null-site of subjectivity, where the privilege of the question 'Where?' no longer holds" (Levinas 1981: 10).

If the discussion seems to have shifted, almost imperceptibly, from "he" to "you," and now back again to "I," then perhaps it is worth recalling the epigraph that Levinas uses for chapter four of *Otherwise than Being*. The chapter is called "Substitution," and the epigraph is a quotation from Paul Celan:

Ich bin du, wenn
ich ich bin.

I am you, when
I am I. (Cited in Levinas 1981: 99)

4. Epilogue

Part of the difficulty in reading Levinas is not so much in coming to terms with a neologistic diction, but in developing a sensitivity to the idiosyncratic semantic field in which Levinas puts familiar words into play. One such field is that of the "Saying." In this paper I have suggested that the logical linguistic operation subtending the event of the Saying is that of a vocative address to "you." To understand the Saying in this way sheds light on Levinas's use of the term, "Other." The singularity of the Other is instantiated in the aporetic embodiment and suspension of "you" in relation to the situation of address: you are actuated in each performative utterance, yet you are radically irrecoverable in any constative definition. Any attempt to anchor "you" in a time and a place outside of the infinitely iterable utterance, is to betray "you" by imposing on you the spatial and temporal co-ordinates characteristic of the third person. It is in this context that the

literary text can be understood to be an event of what Levinas terms the Saying. In its dynamic potential to embody “you” in ways that cannot be exhaustively predicted in advance, infinitely, singularly – *each time* – the literary text effects an open, but at the same time, an engaged response to the Other.

University of Cape Town

Notes

1. I take the terms “address,” “utterance” and “speech event” to apply to written texts as much as to spoken dialogue; the logic of the address not limited to speech in its narrow, literal sense.
2. For a provocative account of “I” and “you,” see J. M. Coetzee’s “Achterberg’s ‘Ballade van de Gasvitter’: The mystery of I and You.” The sentence tagged to this footnote echoes Coetzee: “the notion of identity [that Achterberg’s poem] embodies is a suspended one” (Coetzee 1977: 288).
3. The question of proper names in Levinas demands a separate paper of its own. For an illuminating account of proper names in Derrida and Levinas, see Christian Moraru’s (2000) “‘We embraced each other by our names’: Levinas, Derrida, and the ethics of naming.”
4. The distinction between constative and performative uses of language is J. L. Austin’s. See his *How To Do Things With Words* (1965).
5. For a meticulous and comprehensive account of Levinas’s relation to Martin Buber, see Bernasconi’s (1988) “‘Failure of communication’ as a surplus: Dialogue and lack of dialogue between Buber and Levinas”.
6. Bernasconi points out that Levinas did not read the postscript, and speculates that if he had, Levinas “might not have gone on to ask whether Buber had been aware of ‘the logical originality of the relation’” (Bernasconi 1988: 111).
7. Levinas would argue, though, that what he terms an ethical relation extends beyond this horizon of being; it is a relation to alterity, the “otherwise than being.”
8. The question of time and ethics in Levinas is beyond the scope of this essay. I discuss the issue in a forthcoming paper.

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