Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich, LVI z. 1
PL ISSN 0084-4446

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Being Otherwise: How Events Become Things? Or Levinas Reads *Hamlet*

Abstract

The play is the thing (*Hamlet.* II. ii. 612)
I am not what I am (*Othello.* I. i. 65)

Performance is usually seen as a transient event. Hamlet calls it a thing. How can an event become a thing? Philosophy distinguishes between things and events. The two orders are different. Their difference is articulated in terms of time. Things are continuous, while events are evanescent. Hamlet calls the play within the play a 'thing' (Hamlet. II. Ii. 612). He thus thrusts it into the order of the continuous. Levinas introduces the concept of being otherwise. In order to explain the evanescent continuity, we will make use of this concept. Acting introduces a new mode of being that differs from that of writing. It is „eventive" continuity that we wish to speak about. An actor is only otherwise. By this, we mean that s/he is essentially a difference. An actor is only what s/he is not. By being a difference, the actor survives. Actors do not die. It is true that actors are mortals but the role will survive being acted. Unlike writing, where the word survives as a fixed monument, the role survives through repetition. This repetition is a recreation through repetitive simultaneity. When Iago says: I am not what I am (Othello. I. i. 65), he defines himself as a simultaneous difference. To be only as difference is quite challenging. Indeed, if the only mode of being is being otherwise, we speak about pure difference. Pure difference — total otherness that has no other — is the essence of acting. In the following essay, we intend to explore the generic question of temporality through a comparison between the monumentality of writing and that of acting. We will try to explain how a play is a thing, a continuous mode of being.

play; monument; otherwise; time; continuity; simultaneity

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Preamble:

Hamlet tells the Ghost that his „commandment all alone shall live/within the book and volume of [his] brain/unmixt with baser matters"(*Hamlet*. I. v. 103-105). This metaphor of memory as writing is rooted in the Aristotelian understanding of human psychology. For Aristotle, memory is an „impression". It is, according to him, what sense perception „stamps in" the soul (Aristotle 2013: 1). Memory, therefore, is lingering trace of a past presence. In this sense, it may be seen as a contiuity and a recreation, a presence and an absence (continuity of the impression (stamp) and recreation in a different form of what the impression stands for). We will technically refer to this as representation (better re--presentation). In any case, memory in the Aristotelian sense, can hardly be called a form of „real language" (Schlegel 1971: 260) (in any sense of the term language).

This may be because memory as a presence (the impression as a thing) does not seem to concern Aristotle. He believes that both perception and memory, being the workings of the soul, are based on representation (in the sense of mediated rather than immediate presence). He affirms: „Without presentation intellectual activity is impossible" (Aristotle 2013: 1). As such, the workings of the intellect are secondary to the workings of Nature. The word Nature which now has been de-capitalized used to be synonymous with originality and immediacy. „[M]emory or remembering is […] related to a likeness of that of which it is a presentation" (Aristotle 2013: 1). It is secondary to perception of which Aristotle tells us it is a part. It is „that faculty whereby we perceive time" (Aristotle 2013:1), while sight allows us to perceive distance. This notion is in fact a working of the soul. Indeed, as Albert Einstein has shown us in his *Relativity the Special and General Theory*, „seeing in a «distance» between two marked positions on a practically regid body is something which is lodged deeply in our habit of thought" (Einstein 1920: 3). This applies to the notion of time as well. Northrop Frye argues that „the category of time is fundamental way in which we perceive reality" (Frye and Macpherson 2004: 134).

Predefinitions

The latter concept (reality) is a contested one. It baffles all definitions. Aristotle himself admits that „we speak in many ways of what is" (Aristotle 2003: 1). It may not be obvious whether the category of being (what is) is singular or plural in nature. Nevertheless, the ways in which we represent it (at least in language) are multiple. Central to Aristotle's view of our relationship to being is the notion of mediation. Presentations are the primary materials of the intellect. This word is synonymous with the notion of mediated

interaction with the world. Sensations, emotions and volitions which govern how we interact with the world are subject to the „veil" of mediation. In the Aristotelian understanding of being, our relationship with „what is" lacks both immediacy and accuracy.

In his essay on colors, Aristotle writes that „all things appear black of the kind from which a very small amount of light is reflected" (Aristotle 1955: 5). He tells us that earth, water and air are essentially white, they only seem colored to the eye. Memory is an effect of the senses and sense perceptions are essentially falsified. If we accept Hamlet's „metaphor" of written memory and Aristotle's assertion that memory is a form of inscription or impression, we cannot avoid recalling Geoffrey Bennington's claim that in western metaphysics, „writing is essentially falsified" (Bennington 1993: 44).

Metaphysics certainly is a very complex term. Aristotle, whose book is entitled *Metaphysics*, does not seem to have bothered to define it. After Aristotle, metaphysics is usually defined — if at all — as 'a broad area of philosophy marked out by two types of inquiry. The first aims to be the most general investigation possible into the nature of reality: are there principles applying to everything that is real, to all that is? — if we abstract from the particular nature of existing things that which distinguishes them from each other, what can we know about them merely in virtue of the fact that they exist? The second type of inquiry seeks to uncover what is ultimately real, frequently offering answers in sharp contrast to our everyday experience of the world. Understood in terms of these two questions, metaphysics is very closely related to ontology, which is usually taken to involve both „what is existence (being)?" and „what (fundamentally distinct) types of thing exist?" (Craig 2005: 656). The term, therefore, is far from being definable.

It appears that all we can do is to determine the scope of that branch of philosophy. If we accept that the only way to define Metaphysics is through its scope, we should be able to see that as a branch of philosophy it is still in vogue, since there is no agreement about the methods and approaches.

In relation to language, Geoffrey Bennington tells us that „metaphysics constructs the sign in general as secondary, it thinks of writing as being even more secondary, as the sign of the sign or, more exactly, the (graphic) signifier of the (phonic) signifier" (Bennington 1993: 42). Bennington here is speaking about metaphysics as a system of beliefs — a way of conceiving the world. This vision is governed by what Derrida calls „logocentrism" (Derrida 2001: 76). The relationship between the wriiten word and the world has been problematized since Derrida. For example, writing no longer unequivocally points to its empirical author.

According to Bennington, writing is beyond the control of the author. Indeed, when I write a letter, „I can be sure neither of the success of the destination of my text or my letter […] nor of the correct understanding of my message supposing it arrives at its destination" (Bennington 1993: 42). The letters exchanged in *Hamlet* testify to the accuracy of Bennington's words. The letters of Claudius do not reach their destination. Hamlet's letters always bring about confusion to the readers and the listeners alike. The letters written by Hamlet are always performed on stage. Bennington tells us that „writing does not transcribe all the phonetic qualities of […] speech which can contribute to the transport of my thoughts" (Bennington 1993: 44). When performed the written is invested with the phonetic properties of speech. Richard Schechner voices the now commonplace

assertion that „the text of a play tells you so little about how the production might look" (Richard Schechner 2003: 265). „What is performed is encoded — I want to say nested, trapped, constrained, distilled, restrained, metaphorized in one or more kind of communication" (Schechner 2003: 263). Despite „the incredible diversity of the performance event" (Schechner 2003: 263), „performance behavior isn't free and easy" (Schechner 2003: 264). It is therefore no surprise that Hamlet shows „anxiety towards the proper enactment of «my lines»" (Worthen 2010:96).

Writing vs Speech: Thing vs Event

Describing performance as an event makes it time-bound. Indeed, as *The Shorter Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* tells us:

> Events are entities like collisions and speeches, as opposed to things like planets and people. Many are changes, for example things being first hot and then cold. All *lack a thing's full identity over time: either they are instantaneous, or they have temporal parts, like a speech's words, which stop them being wholly present at an instant; whereas things, which lack temporal parts, are wholly present throughout their lives.* Events may be identified with two types of entity: facts, like the fact that David Hume dies, corresponding to truths like 'Hume dies'; or particulars which, like things, correspond to names, for example 'Hume's death'. Which one they are taken to be affects the content of many metaphysical theories: such as that all particulars are things; that times, or causes and effects, or actions, are events; or that mental events are physical (Craig 2005: 245) [emphasis mine].

What distinguishes things from events — according to this definition — is that things are continuous while events are instantaneous. Events lack a „full identity over time" (Craig 2005: 245). The two examples that the encyclopedia gives are quite interesting. Collisions and speeches are movements and utterances.

In drama, by events we tend to mean gestures and speeches. Props costumes are things for they exist before and may continue to exist after a performance event. The written text is also a thing. In western metaphysics — as a system of beliefs — „everyone knows the written word largely extends the scope of language in space and time, and what we commonly call history, at least thought as progress or decline, only begins with it" (Bennington 1993: 43). Writing and the oral are seen in terms of time.

In drama, the question of time is quite complex. The elements of drama may certainly be seen in terms of time. Indeed, they have different temporal configurations. This makes the relationship between them very problematic. In her essay *Presence and the Revenge of Writing*: *Re-thinking Theatre after Derrida*, Elinor Fuchs describes drama as „a form of writing that paradoxically seems to assert the claim of speech as the direct conduit to being" (Fuchs 2003:109). *Hamlet* certainly tackles the question of being. Hamlet (the character) voices this question in his famous soliloquy:

> To be, or not to be, that is the question:
> Whether 'tis Nobler in the mind to suffer
> The Slings and Arrows of outrageous Fortune,
> Or to take Arms against a Sea of troubles,

And by opposing end them: to die, to sleep
No more; and by a sleep, to say we end
The Heart-ache, *and the thousand Natural shocks*
That Flesh is heir to? 'Tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die to sleep,
To sleep, perchance to Dream; Aye, there's the rub,
For in that sleep of death, what dreams may come

(*Hamlet*. III. I. 56-66)

What Hamlet realizes/or make us realize while he talks about being and non-being is that there are modes of being and non-being other than speech. The question of being in the soliloquy is delivered in an oral form but it does not speak of words.

Inaction and action rather than words are respectively the equivalents of being and non-being. To act is to die (to cease to be by entering the game of death either through suicide or through revenge which ultimately lead to the death of Hamlet both literally and figuratively) to live (to be) is to be passive. There is no reference to speech as a mode of being here. Rather than being a mode of being, speech is an approach to being. Being is „to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" (*Hamlet*. III. I. 57-58). This implied passivity shows that things and events belong to two different orders. These two orders are stability and movement.

This duality also governs the relationship between writing and speech. Bennington writes: „writing communicates my thoughts to far distances, during my absence, even after my death" (Bennington 1993: 50). As a means of communication, writing surpasses speech in its ability to go beyond the here and now. „Of course, speech goes out of me into the world" (Bennington 1993:45), but it goes into the world as an event rather than as a thing. In his treatise „on Things Heard", Aristotle shows that voices emerge „by contraction, expansion, and compression, and also by knocking together owing to the striking of the breath or by musical strings" (Aristotle 1955:51). As such, sounds and speeches are events that are bound in time and place. Writing, by contrast, „remains in a momentality […] linked to death" (Bennington 1993 45).

Death of the Reader: Multiplying the Fixed Monument

This appears in the concept of the death of the author that has reigned since Roland Barthes. Barthes links this concept to the birth of the reader. In *Hamlet*, the dichotomy, dead writer vs living reader, is destabilized as almost all the readers die even before the writer's death. Indeed, Ophelia, Polonius, Laertes, Gertrude and Claudius, who read or listen to Hamlet's letters on stage, die before him. It is true that „even if it is uniquely and exclusively addressed to you, my letter remains readable in principle after your death as much as after mine" (Bennington 1993 52). Still, the death of the reader in *Hamlet* is occasioned by the diffusion of the written. This may be is why only Horatio reads a letter by Hamlet onstage and escapes with his life. This may be because he does not show it to any other character. Polonius is the first reader to die after he reveals the letters of Hamlet to the royal couple. He exposes the private lives of Hamlet and of his daughter

Ophelia. Written letters are supposed to be private. With the invention of print — and later with the web — the private space was encroached upon. The private letters of Thomas Acquinas[1], Machiavelli (Machiavelli 1988) etc are being published along with their other works.

Thanks to the efforts of Medievalists and Feminists *The Paston Letters* (Cuddon 1999: 454), *Letters of Madeliene and Cathrine Des Roches* (Larson 2006) are revealed to the world. This critical interest in the letter form may have been fueled by an earlier aesthetic interest in that form. Indeed, J. A. Cudden tells us that „the letter form has been adapted and exploited in various ways since the 17TH century" (Cuddon 1999: 454). He cites many examples like Pascal's *Lettres Provinciales* (1656-57) and *Letters of a Turkish Spy* (1687-94) (Cuddon 1999: 454). These two instances signal the birth of the fictitious addressee.

This could be seen as a step toward the „post-modern" death of the addressee that the title of Anne R. Larson's translation of Les Dames des Roches seems to suggest. It is from Mother and daughter. It is true that they addressed those letters to each other. Still, they both are effaced as readers by the title Larson has chosen for her translation. The addressee is important to the generation of meaning in so private a form of communication. The effacing of the addressee in the manner we have seen above confuses the reader as the meaning of the letter becomes in a state of flux.

The letters of Hamlet to Ophelia and to the King are exposed to a similar fate. Indeed, as Polonius reads the love letters to the king and the queen, they cease to be addressed to Ophelia. Ophelia may — and may not — blush as Hamlet's letters are read in public but her presence is not required.

[1] For instance his Letter to Brother John de Modo Studendi in (Aquinas 1947).

(in John Gielgud's performance (1948) Ophelia is not present when the letter is read)

(RSC (2008) Ophelia is present as the letters are read)

Ophelia herself may be absent if the director chooses. The absence of Ophelia from the scene maybe read as an allegory for the absent addressee of the age of print. The death of the reader — as addressee — is the outcome of the diffusion of the monumental sign (writing).

As a matter of course, Bennington seems to repeat Shakespeare when he rejects the symmetry reader vs writer. This symmetry, according to Bennington, cannot work because it cannot be based on the mortality of the author vs the longevity of the reader. The reader as addressee disappears as the letters become public either through disclosure or through being turned to a literary genre. The literal deaths of Ophelia, Gertrude, Laertes and Claudius may be read in the light of their disclosure of Hamlet's letters.

Horatio the Surviving Reader

Horatio too receives a letter from his friend but he reads it on his own. The violation of privacy leads to the death of the other readers in *Hamlet*. This may explain the „fact" that only Horatio survives. In order for him to survive — being the bearer of a message — Horatio bears the dying voice of Hamlet rather than a written letter. He escapes the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who „are dead" (*Hamlet*. V. v. 374) bearers of written messages.

Rather than being a conduit to being, speech preserves being. It is, in a sense, the conation of being. Indeed, Hamlet entrusts his friend with his „dying voice" (*Hamlet*. V.v. 357). He passes his story through his voice rather than in a written form. The same is true for the Ghost. Its choice of the oral enables it to return in the closet scene.

As opposed toThomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy,* where the murderer of Horatio is exposed by Bel-imperia through a letter, in Hamlet, the ghost chooses speech to reveal the death of King Hamlet. Bel-imperia, as a writer, and Hieronimo, as a reader, have to die or be silent at the end, while the Ghost reappears in the closet scene. Still, he reappears in a questionable shape. Hamlet talks with him as with a father (though he does not say the word) but Gertrude does not see him. The apparition cannot assert his identity. Many critics may feel inclined that the second appearance of the Ghost may be an illusion of Hamlet's. As a matter of course, the Ghost cannot ward off the accusation of being a usurper.

Long Live the Usurper

As a usurper of another person's form, the ghost resembles the actor who, in John Marston's words, „can die, and live to act a second part" (Marston 2007: xii). In this vein, Polonius seems to allay the effect of his death when he speaks about his part in *Julius Caesar*. He reminds his friend Richard Burbage, and the audience, that *Hamlet* is not the only play in which he gets killed by Burbage.

The conversation between the two actors runs as follows

Hamlet

My lord,
you play'd once in the university, you say?

Polonius

That I did, my Lord and was accounted a good actor.

Hamlet

What did you enact?

Polonius

I did enact Julius Caesar; I was killed in the capitol;
Brutus killed me

Hamlet

It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf
there

(*Hamlet*. III.ii. 104-111)

Actors do not die for real. They only leave the stage to reappear.

Actors are a different kind of reader. The following example will elucidate this. Hamlet inserts a number of lines in the play within the play. We never know whether those lines are enacted or not during the brief performance in the castle hall. „The players, Hamlet tells Ophelia, cannot/keep counsel: they will tell all" (*Hamlet*. III. ii. 160-161). To our disappointment, the players do keep council and we are in no way able to know what happens off the stage. Players are the kind of readers who read both in private and in public.

Hamlet's lines (his written voice) are lost in the „multi-vocal" performance. Unlike letters, where reading does not destroy the univocal, performance is essentially destructive of the signature. The hand of Hamlet matters only in a letter. He himself recognizes the depersonalizing effect of performance when he refers to the *Murder of Gonzago* as 'writ in/choice Italian' (*Hamlet*. III. ii. 280-281). The use of the passive voice in these two lines is denotative of this depersonalization of the playwright's pen. The actor, in a sense, displaces the author as the reader who outlives both author and text.

Enter Levinas unwillingly

This should raise an objection, for at first glance, it would seem that the actor is the most transient of all media. Indeed, the actor is mortal and does not literally outlast the written text. The answer to this objection comes from Emanuel Levinas. We do not intend

to say that Levinas actually wrote about this question. What we wish to say is that he introduced a concept that we find usefully (re)definable. This is „être *autrement*" (Levinas 1978 : 13) which I translate as being otherwise.

I will further distort this concept (translation is an initial distortion) by writing it thus: being other-wise (**être** *autre-ment*) to show the essentialist trap which this concept inevitably — if not literally — contains. First of all, otherwise entails that there is more than one way in which an entity is. Second, it leads us to ask whether being otherwise affects the essence of the being. Put differently, does being preserve its sameness with itself if it is otherwise, that is, can any entity be itself otherwise? Finally, otherwise also implies that there is no being without „conatus", effort or mode of being.

What is to be Otherwise?

The actor essentially is other-wise and it is precisely that which makes him/her immortal. This poses a challenge to the concept être *autrement*. Initially, there seems to be no logical difficulty in conceiving of entities as having more than one mode of being. We know that modes of being as well as being are questionable concepts. Still, for technical reasons, let us suppose that the questions of „which sort of entities there are, what one is saying when one says some entity is, and the necessary conditions on thinking of an entity as something which is" (Craig: 2005: 88) are virtually answerable. Being otherwise (or other-wise) presupposes an initial mode of being. This should pose no challenge viewing the presupposition we have made. However, when otherwise or other-wise *autrement or autre-ment* is the only mode of being which is the case of the actor, a challenge appears.

An actor, as we have said, is essentially otherwise. To explain this, we need to consider performance in relation to writing. W. B. Worthen tells us that „Hamlet […] signals the contemporary literalization of drama, its preservation and publication not in the evanescence of performance but as an alternative permanent object, a book" (Worthen 2010: 99). Writing, as Worthen describes it, is monumental. In this sense, it differs from performance in its fixity. It is what may be called a thing. Performance, however, is considered as an event. Indeed, Worthen –among others — has established that „any performance represents the performer" (Worthen 2010: 99). A performer is mortal and cannot outlast the text (unless he is turned into a text through recording which is a form of writing –impression, fixing — which is not our interest). Notwithstanding this transience, W. B. Worthen does not — at least in the sentence I quoted above — deny performance any role in the preservation and publication of a play.

How can evanescent performance preserve the play? The answer, we believe, is: through difference. We did not use the familiar term differance, because the concept we intend to use does not encompass both difference and deferral. This does not mean that we are not „concerned with the category of the wholly other" (Craig 2005: 174) as any „post-Derridan" inevitably is. It is only that we are interested in a kind of synchronic alterity rather than in the familiar diachronic one.

I am not what I am: Simultaneous Alterity

When Iago says: „I am not what I am" (*Othello*. I.i. 65), we may understand that he is other to what he is (no matter what this may be) at the time of speaking. In this sense he is not simply a signifier. The signifier is not what it means but Iago is not what he is.

The signifier implies the absence of the signified.

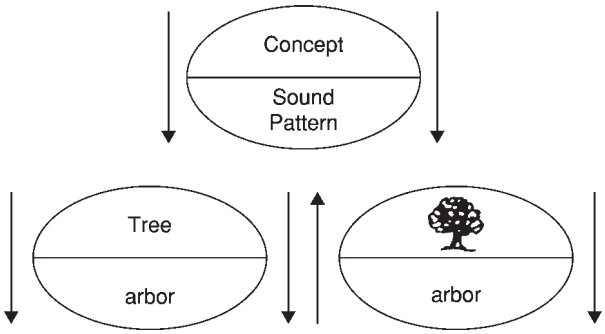

figure 1: The linguistic sign as a „two sided psychological entity"
(Brown, Barber and Stainton 2010: 666)

Presenting the linguistic sign as a two faceted coin implies the idea of absence (differance). Every facet of the coin can only appear when the other is absent. But „I am not what I am" descries a disturbing simultaneity.

This is the simultaneity of essential difference, being otherwise. Causality, linearity and the entire eschatological categories of beginning and ending should be redefined here. We quoted Frye earlier. We certainly do not wish to question how fundamental the category of time is to our thinking. All we have been doing so far is to think in terms of time and we intend to continue doing so. We will only give up the diachronic, which can hardly account for the type of difference we can see in *Hamlet*.

I am not what I am redefines difference. Rather than the game of presence and absence which the metaphor of the coin implies, we have something very similar to the *Rubin vase effect*. The Ghost is an interesting example of that. He tells Hamlet that he is his „father's spirit" (*Hamlet*. I.v. 9) and starts by speaking about Hamlet's father as if they were two distinct persons: „revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (*Hamlet*. I. v. 25). But as he starts narrating the details of the murder, he uses the first person pronoun I. As he speaks on, the difference between the untouchable (un-crossable) airy spirit and the physical king Hamlet vanishes. The two are blended through „the monstrous effectiveness of acting" (Worthen 2010: 101). As the Ghost relinquishes the difference, the king seems to return but only in part for his death becomes more real than ever to his son. This may be because, he returns as other.

The Haunted Man Onstage

The Ghost like any actor is otherwise. Cleopatra explains this when she says: „*I shall see*/ some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness/I'the posture of a whore" (*Antony and Cleopatra*. V. ii. 217-219) [emphasis mine]. Cleopatra says that she will be present as some squeaking boy presents her as a whore. The simultaneity between the presented and the presenter is further articulated by Hamlet when he describes the players as „the abstract and brief chronicles of the/ time" (*Hamlet*. III. Ii. 532-533).

The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary terms defines chronicle as follows: „a written record of events presented in order of time, and updated regularly over a prolonged period" (Baldick 2001: 39-40). A play resembles a chronicle in the sense that it is updated over a prolonged period. A play is still different from a chronicle.

The difference is that what is updated is not the events but the performance. For example, in 1913, William Poel maintained that Hamlet „has an antipathy to the king, and is displeased with his mother, it is not likely he would be much in company of either" (Poel 1913: 160). He suggested that in the second scene, Hamlet should not enter with them. Performance, as a reading, keeps the play alive through difference. Cleopatra, the actor/actress, may see another actress taking up her role. The presence of the character, Cleopatra, depends on the skill of the actor. An example of the very skilful actor is the first player in *Hamlet* who speaks the speech of Aeneas. Hamlet feels offended that in „a dream of passion" (*Hamlet*. II.ii.557), the player seems to conjure the spirit of Aeneas that Hamlet — who knows it is but a speech — could not help asking: „what is Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba,/that he should weep for her?" (*Hamlet*. II. ii. 563-564). This simultaneity is quite disturbing. The concept of difference becomes hazy as the actor's unconventional monumentality becomes evident through his/her skill.

The play is the thing

The actor is an evanescent monument. This paradoxical epithet is the „essence" (a word that we use only technically) of being other-wise. As a reader, the actor survives in different forms. The actor is through being what he is not. He survives as difference. This is how the evanescence becomes monumental and the play turns into a „thing" (*Hamlet*. II.ii. 612). Performance is an „eventive" monumentality, a thing and an event at the same time (literally at the same time).

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