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Author(s): Jacques Derrida

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# A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event

Jacques Derrida

Translated by Gila Walker

Thank you. I assure you that what I'm going to say will be much more unequipped and exposed than Gad Soussana's beautiful lecture. Before babbling a few words, I'd like to join in the thanks already expressed and tell Phyllis Lambert<sup>1</sup> and all our hosts how grateful I am for the hospitality with which they've honored me. We settled on very little in advance, but we did agree that I'd try to say a few words after Gad Soussana, that I'd then turn the floor over to Alexis Nouss, and would pick up afterwards in a somewhat more enduring way. I will try to carry through my task in the first part of this promised talk by saying a few very simple things.

It is worth recalling that an event implies surprise, exposure, the unanticipated, and we at least agreed to one thing between ourselves and that was that the title for this session, for this discussion, would be chosen by my friends sitting here beside me. I take this opportunity to say that it was on account of friendship that I thought I should accept to expose myself here in this way, friendship not only for those who are sitting here beside me but for all my friends from Québec; some, whom I haven't seen for a long time, are here today in the audience and to them I address a word of greeting. I wanted this open-ended and, to a large degree, improvised gathering to be placed in this way under the heading of an event of friendship. This presupposes friendship, of course, but also surprise and the unanticipated. It was understood that Gad Soussana and Alexis Nouss would choose the title and that I would try as well as I could to present not answers but some improvised remarks. Obviously, if there is an event, it must never be something that is predicted or planned, or even really decided upon.

1. Phyllis Lambert founded the Centre canadien d'architecture.

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Jacques Derrida, "Une Certaine possibilité impossible de dire l'événement" © 2003 by Editions de l'Harmattan.  
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What we are doing here is simply a pretext for talking to one another, maybe for talking without having anything special to say, simply for the sake of talking, addressing the other in a context where what we say matters less than the fact that we're talking to the other. The sentence that constitutes the question and that serves as a title "Is saying the event possible?" [*Dire l'événement, est-ce possible?*] is a question. It has the form of a question. It's a question in five words. There's one noun: "event"; an article: "the"; two verbs: "saying" and "is" (and "is" is not just any verb in just any mood); and there's an adjective: "possible." Is it "possible"? My first subject of concern had to do with the question of knowing which of these words to insist on. Even before asking myself whether or not there are unsayable events (and Gad Soussana told us a lot about this subject in his beautiful discussion of Rilke), even before asking myself about this—in the "words and arguments which occur to me at the moment" that defines my condition—I asked myself whether in fact the first thing in this sentence that should be the focus of inquiry wasn't precisely the question itself, the fact that it is a question, the questioning nature of the sentence. I'll be very brief here. I'm simply opening an avenue or two that I'll explore after Alexis Nouss has spoken.

There are two directions in this sentence "Is saying the event possible?" I see this question mark at the opening of two possibilities. One is philosophical. We're in a place dedicated to architecture here and you know the affinities that have always existed between architecture, architectonics, and philosophy. The question has long, probably always, been deemed the philosophical attitude per se. A question like "Is saying the event possible?" puts us into a truly philosophical stance. We are speaking as philosophers. Only a philosopher, regardless of whether he or she is a philosopher by profession or not, can ask such a question and hope that someone will be attentive to it.

"Is saying the event possible?" In answer to this question, what I'd like to say is plainly and simply "yes." Not "yes" to the event but "yes" to saying that the event is possible. I would like to say "yes" to you firstly as a sign of gratitude. Philosophy has always thought of itself as the art, experience, and history of the question. Even when they agree on nothing else, philosophers will end up saying, "Yes, that's who we are, after all, people who ask questions; we can at least agree on the fact that we want to give the question a chance." It began with Plato and continued until a certain Heidegger (but there have been others too in our day) gave some thought to the fact that before the question—and this "before" is not chronological; it's a "before" before time—that before the question, there was a possibility of a certain "yes," of a certain acquiescence. One day very late in his life, Heidegger in

his own way said that when he had said earlier that questioning (*Fragen*), or the question (*Frage*), was the piety of thought (*Frömmigkeit des Denkens*), well, he should in fact have said, without contradicting himself, that “before” the question, there was what he called acquiescence (*Zusage*). A consentment, an affirmation of sorts. Not the kind of dogmatic affirmation that resists the question. But “yes” to a question being asked, to a question being addressed to someone, to me talking to you, because, as I said, I’m basically here to talk to you, regardless of whether I have anything special to say. When you address someone, even if it’s to ask a question, before the question is formulated, there must be an acquiescence, an “I’m talking to you, yes, yes, welcome; I’m talking to you, I’m here, you’re here, Hello!” This “yes” before the question—this “before” being neither logical nor chronological—is embedded in the question itself. It is not a questioning “yes.”

There is, then, a certain “yes” at the heart of the question, a “yes” to, a “yes” to the other, which may not be unrelated to a “yes” to the event, that is to say, a “yes” to what comes, to letting-it-come. The event is also what comes, what happens [*arrive*]. We’ll be speaking a lot of the event today as that which comes, as that which happens. We may ask ourselves first whether this “yes” to the event or to the other, or to the event as other or as the coming of the other, is something that is said, whether this “yes” is said or not. Among all who have spoken about this original “yes,” there’s Lévinas and there’s Rosenzweig.

Rosenzweig said that the “yes” is an archi-original word. Even when the “yes” is not uttered, it is there. There is a silent, unsayable “yes” implicit in every sentence. A sentence starts out saying “yes.” Even the most negative, critical, or destructive statement implies this “yes.” So I’d like to make the question mark in “Is saying the event possible?” contingent on this “yes,” on the chance, perhaps even the threat of this “yes.” A first “yes” and one then another “yes.” Personally—but I do not want to talk about myself tonight—I’ve taken a great interest in trying to interpret Heidegger’s *Zusage*. I’ve been greatly engaged in the question of this “yes,” this prior “yes,” prior to the no in a way. I’d like to bring up another reference to speak of another “yes to” that I hear echoing in the work of Lévinas, whom you also talked about. And it is also in echo to what you were saying that I bring up Lévinas. Lévinas, and here I’ll have to go very quickly (we go very quickly by definition; indeed, the event is that which goes very quickly; there can be an event only when it’s not expected, when one can no longer wait for it, when the coming of what happens interrupts the waiting; so we have to go very quickly), Lévinas, then, defined ethics for a long time as a face-to-face with the other, in a nearly dual situation.

You spoke earlier of Hegel’s beautiful comments on the abyss of eyes

meeting, when I see the other seeing me, when the other's eye is not only a visible eye but a seeing eye and I am blind to the seeing eye of the other. As for Lévinas, he defined the relationship to the ethical as a face-to-face with the other and then he eventually had to admit that in the dual relation of the ethical face-to-face with the other, the Third is present too. And the Third is not a person, not a *terstis*, a witness who comes in addition to the two. The Third is always already there in the dual relation, in the face-to-face. Lévinas says that this Third, the coming of this Third that has always already come to pass, is the origin or rather the birth of the question. It is with the Third that the call to justice appears as a question. The Third is the one who questions me in the face-to-face, who suddenly makes me feel that there's a risk of injustice in the ethical if I do not take into account the other of the other. The question, the birth of the question is joined together, according to Lévinas, with what puts me into question in justice, and the "yes" to the other is implicated in the birth of the question as justice. Later, when we talk about the event again and we ask ourselves if the saying of it is possible, I'd like these remarks on the question of the Third and of justice not to be absent.

So I was asking myself what to emphasize in the sentence, "Is saying the event possible?" And I've been saying, not a word, but the question mark, the nature of the sentence. It's a question. What does a question mean? What's the relationship between the question and the "yes"? But if I'm going to say more and not restrict myself to emphasizing the suspense in this question mark, I'll have to choose a word from the sentence and, as I've said, there are five words, four if we drop the article: a noun, two verbs, and an adjective.

When a question is addressed to someone, there is always the risk, as you have so rightly remarked, that the answer is already insinuated in the very form of the question. In this sense there is violence in questions insofar as they impose beforehand, as they pre-impose a possible answer. It's a matter of justice for the person who's been asked the question to turn it around and ask the other, "What do you mean?" "Before answering, I'd like to know what you mean, what your question means." This presupposes that the question be supported by more than one sentence, that it be given a framework, and, as you see here, my improvised remarks have been given a strong framework by friends who, unlike me, have prepared their speeches.

"What do you mean?" This is basically what I'm asking them. They've brought me here to speak about this. "What do they mean?" And, for my part, I'm indicating what I intend to do. When I speak again later, I'll be taking an interest in all of these words, of course, but I've chosen, and I'll come back to this later, to put a more insistent accent on the word *possible*.

I'll be speaking about "saying," about "the event," and about "is" but especially about "possible," which I will very quickly turn into "impossible." I'll say, I'll try to show in what way the impossibility, a certain impossibility of saying the event or a certain impossible possibility of saying the event, forces us to rethink not only what "saying" or what "event" means, but what *possible* means in the history of philosophy. To put it otherwise, I will try to explain how I understand the word "possible" in this sentence in a way that this "possible" is not simply "different from" or "the opposite of" impossible, and why, in this case, "possible" and "impossible" say the same thing. But I'm going to ask you to wait a while and I'll attempt this explanation later.

[The second speech "Paroles sans voix" is delivered by Alexis Nouss]

I will not surprise you when I say that I feel very unequipped after another so intimidating and beautiful lecture. In the remaining time, I'm not supposed to be the last one to speak. This is what is called a "seminar," and that means that we have to reserve time for questions, to be "interactive," as they say. Although everything's been said, in the time of a post-scriptum, I'm going to add something, if you will. I'm very grateful for what you've said. The names of some of the people that have been pronounced must guide our thoughts on the saying and on the event: after Rilke, I'm thinking of Celan and of some of my friends, living or dead, of Deleuze, Barthes, Sarah Kofman—I was moved to hear you name them—of Blanchot too.

I hope you'll forgive me now if I return to my prosaic improvisation in an attempt to hurry to the question that has already been overdeveloped by my predecessors. I said that there were several avenues to open, after the question "Is saying the event possible?" I spoke about the question as such, about the question mark and the questioning formulation. Now I'd like to turn to what "saying" could mean when it comes to the "event." There are two ways at least of determining the saying in respect to the event. At least two. Saying can mean speaking—is there voiceless speech [*parole sans voix*], is there speech without saying or saying without speech?—enunciating, referring to, naming, describing, imparting knowledge, informing. Indeed, the first modality or determination of the saying is a saying of knowledge: saying what is. Saying the event is also saying what happens, trying to say what is presently, what comes to pass presently, saying what is, what happens, what occurs, what comes to pass. This is a saying that is close to knowledge and information, to the enunciation that says something about something. And then there is a saying that *does in saying*, a saying that does, that enacts. This morning, I was watching television—I'm going to speak

about television, about the news [*les informations*], because it is also a matter of information, of knowledge as information—I was watching the Quebecer news and I fell on a short sequence about René Lévesque, an archive document, a synopsis that showed his rise, his action and his relative failure, and what happened before and after the failure. The journalist, or whoever was presenting the program, made the following comment: “after making the news [*faire l'événement*], René Lévesque had to comment on the news.” Whereas he spoke about events after his resignation, beforehand he produced them notably through speech. And, as you know (I don't intend to give you a class on the constative and the performative), there's an utterance that is called constative, a theoretical speech that consists in saying what is, describing or noting what is, and there's an utterance that is called *performative* and that does in speaking. For instance, when I make a promise, I'm not saying an event; I'm producing it by my commitment. I promise or I say. I say “yes,” I started out by saying “yes” earlier. The “yes” is performative. The example that is always cited in speaking about performative utterances is that of marriage, the “I do” [*oui* in French] in answer to “Do you take this man or this woman . . .?” does not say the event, it makes it, it constitutes the event. It's a speech-event, a saying-event.

There are two main directions here. Even if (as is my case) one doesn't altogether subscribe to this now canonical opposition, we can give credit to it, at least initially, in order to try to put a little order into the questions we are addressing. Let's first consider saying in its function of knowledge, observation, and information.

Saying the event is saying what is, saying things as they present themselves, historical events as they take place, and this is a question of information. As you've suggested, even demonstrated, this saying of the event as a statement of knowledge or information, a sort of cognitive saying of description, this saying of the event is always somewhat problematical because the structure of saying is such that it always comes after the event. Secondly, because as saying and hence as structure of language, it is bound to a measure of generality, iterability, and repeatability, it always misses the singularity of the event. One of the characteristics of the event is that not only does it come about as something unforeseeable, not only does it disrupt the ordinary course of history, but it is also absolutely singular. On the contrary, the saying of the event or the saying of knowledge regarding the event lacks, in a certain manner *a priori*, the event's singularity simply because it comes after and it loses the singularity in generality. But if we are attentive to the political dimension, there is something of graver significance to consider, which you have both brought up in earnest terms when speaking about saying the event in the form of information. The first image that comes to

mind of this saying the event is what has been developing for a long time, in particular in modernity, in terms of relating events and that is the news [*l'information*]. Television, radio, and newspapers report events, telling us what happened or what's happening. We have the impression that the extraordinary progress in the development of information machines, of machines made for saying the event, should in some way increase the powers of speech vis-à-vis the event, the power of informative speech. Without dwelling on the obvious, may I remind you that this would-be saying, and even showing [*monstration*] of the event, is never, of course, commensurate with it and is never reliable *a priori*.

In fact, we know that as the ability to immediately say and show the event grows, so does the capacity of the technology of saying and showing to intervene, interpret, select, filter, and, consequently, to make the event happen [*faire l'événement*]. When people pretend today to show us live what's happening, the event taking place in the Gulf War, we know that, as live and apparently immediate as the discourse and picture may be, highly sophisticated techniques of picture-taking, projection, and filtering enable instantaneous interpretation, framing, and selection so that what is shown to us live is already, not a saying or showing of the event, but its production. An interpretation does what it says. It may pretend simply to state, show, and inform, but it actually produces. It is already performative in a way. In a naturally unsaid, unavowed, and undeclared manner, a saying of the event that makes the event is passed off as a saying of the event. The political vigilance that this calls for on our part obviously consists in organizing a critical examination of all the mechanisms that hold out the appearance of *saying* the event when they are in fact *making* it, interpreting and producing it.

Our critical vigilance regarding all these modalities of saying the event must not be restricted to the techniques being used in studios, where there are twenty-five cameras, a picture can be framed in a second, and journalists asked to record this rather than that. It must encompass the huge news-making and news-appropriating machines of the TV stations. These appropriations are not merely national; they are cross-border and international, and, as such, they have a dominant influence over the saying of the event. Their powers are concentrated in places that we have to learn to analyze, and even contest or transform. This saying that makes the event while feigning simply to state, describe, and relate it, constitutes an immense field of analysis and criticism for us. Event-making is covertly being substituted for event-saying. All of which leads us to a dimension of saying the event that overtly presents itself as performative: the modes of speaking that consist not in informing, reporting, relating, describing, or noting but

in making something happen through speech. A good number of examples could be given of this. It's understood that there'll be a discussion so I don't want to speak for too long. I'd just like to indicate a few points of reference for one possible analysis of this *saying the event* that consists in *making the event*, in making it happen, and to look at the impossibility lodged in this possibility.

Let's consider three or four examples. Take the example of the confession: a confession does not simply involve saying what happened. If I have committed a crime, the fact that I go to the police and say, "I've committed a crime" does not in itself constitute a confession. It becomes a confession only when, beyond the act of imparting information, I confess that I am guilty. In other words, the confession is not simply a matter of letting someone know what happened; I can very well notify someone of a wrong, without avowing that I am guilty. There is more to the confession than informing, more than the constative or cognitive saying of the event. There is a transformation in my relationship to the other, in which I present myself as guilty and I say, "I'm guilty, and not only am I informing you of this, but I'm declaring that I am guilty of this." In his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine asked God, "Why must I still confess to You when You know everything? You know all my iniquities, You are all-knowing." In other words, the confession does not consist in telling God what He knows. It is not an informative statement that would apprise God of my sins. The confession is a matter of transforming my relationship to the other, of transforming myself by admitting my guilt. In the confession, there is a saying of the event, of what happened, that produces a transformation. It produces another event and is not simply a saying of knowledge. Every time that *saying the event* exceeds this dimension of information, knowledge, and cognition, it enters the night—you spoke a great deal of the night—the "night of non-knowing," something that's not merely ignorance, but that no longer pertains to the realm of knowledge. A non-knowing that is not lack, not sheer obscurantism, ignorance, or non-science, but simply something that is not of the same nature as knowing. A *saying the event* that produces the event beyond the confines of knowledge. This kind of saying is found in many experiences where, ultimately, the possibility that such and such an event will happen appears impossible.

Let's look at a few other examples, some of which have already retained my attention in published texts, others not. Consider the gift. Giving should be an event. It has to come as a surprise, from the other or to the other; it has to extend beyond the confines of the economic circle of exchange. For giving to be possible, for a giving event to be possible, it has to look impossible. Why? If I give to the other in thanks or in exchange, giving has not

taken place. If I'm expecting the other to thank me, to recognize my gift, and to give me something in return, in some way or another, symbolically, materially, or physically, there is no giving either. Even if the thanks are purely symbolic, they annul the giving. Giving has to overreach gratitude. To be able to receive the gift, in a certain way the other must not even know that I'm giving it, because once the person knows, then he or she enters the circle of thanks and gratitude and annuls the gift. Likewise, one could say that I must not even know that I'm giving. If I know I'm giving, I say to myself "here I am, giving a present"—and you see the connection between the present and the event. If I present myself as the giver, I'm already congratulating myself, thanking myself, feeling self-gratified for giving, and, consequently, the mere consciousness of giving annuls the gift. It suffices that giving be presented to the other or to myself as giving, that it be presented as such to the donor or the donee, for the giving to be immediately annulled. This means—to go quickly—that the gift as a gift is possible only when it appears impossible. The gift must not appear to be one for giving to take place. And one will never know if it actually did. No one can ever say, with any satisfying criterion of knowledge, "a giving has taken place," or else "I've given," or "I've received." Therefore giving, if there is any, if it is possible, must appear impossible. And consequently giving is doing the impossible. The event of giving is not something that can be said; as soon as it is, it's destroyed. Put otherwise, the measure of the event's possibility is given by its impossibility. Giving is impossible, and it can only be possible as impossible. There is no more eventful event than a gift that disrupts the exchange, the course of history, the circle of economy. There is no possibility of giving that is not presented as not being present. It's the impossible itself.

Take a word very close to giving, and that is forgiving. Forgiving is also a form of giving. If I forgive only what's forgivable, I've forgiven nothing. Someone has done something wrong, committed an offense or one of those abominable crimes that were evoked earlier—the concentration camps. An immeasurable crime has been committed. I cannot forgive the person for it. If I forgive only what is venial, only what is excusable or pardonable, the slight misdeed, the measured and measurable, the determined and limited wrongdoing, in that case, I'm not forgiving anything. If I forgive because it's forgivable, because it's easy to forgive, I'm not forgiving. I can only forgive, if I do forgive, when there is something unforgivable, when it isn't possible to forgive. In other words, forgiveness, if there is any, must forgive that which is unforgivable otherwise it is not forgiveness. Forgiving, if it is possible, can only come to be as impossible. But this impossibility is not simply negative. This means that the impossible must be done. The event, if there is one, consists in doing the impossible. But when someone does

the impossible, if someone does the impossible, no one, above all not the doer of the deed, is in a position to adjust a self-assured, theoretical statement to the event and say, "this happened" or "forgiveness has taken place" or "I've forgiven." A statement such as "I forgive" or "I've forgiven" is absurd, and, moreover, it's obscene. How can I be sure that I have the right to forgive and that I've effectively forgiven rather than forgotten, or overlooked, or reduced the offense to something forgivable? I can no more say, "I forgive" than "I give." These are impossible statements. I can always make them, but in doing so, I betray what I mean to say. I'm not saying anything. I should never be able to say, "I'm giving" or "I'm forgiving."

Therefore, giving or forgiving, if there is any, must appear impossible; they must defy all theoretical or cognitive statements, all "this is that" type judgments, all judgments along the lines of "forgiving is," "I've a forgiving nature," or "the gift has been given."

Let me take another example that I've recently tried to develop on the subject of invention. Here we are in a place of creation, art, and invention. Invention is an event; the words themselves indicate as much. It's a matter of finding, of bringing out, of making what is not yet here come to be. Inventing, if it is possible, is not inventing. What does this mean? You see that I am approaching this question of the possible, which is the question that brings us together here today. If I can invent what I invent, if I have the ability to invent what I invent, that means that the invention follows a potentiality, an ability that is in me, and thus it brings nothing new. It does not constitute an event. I have the ability to make this happen and consequently the event, what happens at that point, disrupts nothing; it's not an absolute surprise. Similarly, if I give what I can give, if I give what I have and what I can give, I'm not giving. A rich person, who gives what he or she has, is not giving. As Plotinus, Heidegger, and Lacan have said, you have to give what you don't have. If you give what you have, you're not giving. In the same way, if I invent what I can invent, what is possible for me to invent, I'm not inventing. Similarly, when you conduct an epistemological analysis or an analysis in the history of science and technology, you examine a field in which a theoretical, mathematical, or technological invention is possible, a field that may be called a paradigm in one case, an *episteme* in another, or yet again a configuration; now, if the structure of the field makes an invention possible (at a given point in time a given architectural invention is possible because the state of society, architectural history, and architectural theory make it possible), then this invention is not an invention. Precisely because it's possible. It merely develops and unfolds a possibility, a potentiality that is already present and therefore it is not an event. For there to be an invention event, the invention must appear impossible. What

was not possible becomes possible. In other words, the only invention possible is the invention of the impossible. This statement may seem to be a game, a mere rhetorical contradiction. In fact, I believe it is an irreducible necessity. If there is invention—and maybe there never is, just as there may never be giving or forgiving—but if there is invention, it's possible only on the condition of being impossible. The event's eventfulness depends on this experience of the impossible. What comes to pass, as an event, can only come to pass if it's impossible. If it's possible, if it's foreseeable, then it doesn't come to pass.

Now, and this will be my last example before opening the discussion, let's consider hospitality, the example I started with in thanking my hosts. You spoke of the event as not only what comes to pass [*arrive*], but as the *arrivant*. The absolute *arrivant* must not be merely an invited guest, someone I'm prepared to welcome, whom I have the ability to welcome. It must be someone whose unexpected, unforeseeable arrival, whose *visitation*—and here I'm opposing visitation to invitation—is such an irruption that I'm not prepared to receive the person. I must not even be prepared to receive the person, for there to be genuine hospitality: not only have no prior notice of the arrival but no prior definition of the newcomer, and no way of asking, as is done at a border, "Name? Nationality? Place of origin? Purpose of visit? Will you be working here?" The absolute guest [*hôte*] is this *arrivant* for whom there is not even a horizon of expectation, who bursts onto my horizon of expectations when I am not even prepared to receive the one who I'll be receiving. That's hospitality. Hospitality is not merely receiving that which we are able to receive. Lévinas says somewhere that the subject is a host [*hôte*] who welcomes the infinite beyond his or her capacity to welcome. Welcoming beyond my capacity to welcome means receiving precisely when I cannot receive, when the coming of the other overwhelms me, seems bigger than my house, and I can't know beforehand if he or she will behave well in my home, in my city, in my state, in my nation. The arrival of the *arrivant* will constitute an event only if I'm not capable of receiving him or her, only if I receive the coming of the newcomer precisely when I'm not capable of doing so. In the arrival of the *arrivant*, it is the absolute other who falls on me. I insist on the verticality of this coming, because surprise can only come from on high. When Lévinas or Blanchot speak of the "Très Haut," the Most High, it is not simply religious terminology. It means that the event as event, as absolute surprise, must fall on me. Why? Because if it doesn't fall on me, it means that I see it coming, that there's an horizon of expectation. Horizontally, I see it coming, I fore-see it, I fore-say it, and the event is that which can be said [*dit*] but never predicted [*prédit*]. A predicted event is not an event. The event falls on me because I don't see it coming.

Like the *arrivant*, the event is something that vertically befalls me when I didn't see it coming. The event can only seem to me to be impossible before it occurs [*arriver*]. This doesn't mean that events don't occur, that there are none; what it means is that I cannot say the event in theoretical terms and I cannot pre-dict it either. This impossibility, with regard to invention, arrival, and the event, could lead us to conclude that the saying remains or should remain disarmed, utterly disarmed by this very impossibility, baffled in face of the always unique, exceptional, and unpredictable arrival of the other, of the event as other, and that I must remain absolutely disarmed. And yet, this disarmament, this vulnerability, and this exposure are never pure or absolute. I was saying before that the saying of the event presupposed some sort of inevitable neutralization of the event by its iterability, that saying always harbors the possibility of resaying. A word is comprehensible only because it can be repeated; whenever I speak, I'm using repeatable words and uniqueness is swept into this iterability. Similarly, the event cannot appear to be an event, when it appears, unless it is already repeatable in its very uniqueness. It is very difficult to grasp this idea of uniqueness as immediately iterable, of singularity as immediately engaged in substitution, as Lévinas would say. Substitution is not simply the replacement of a replaceable uniqueness: substitution replaces the irreplaceable. The fact that, right away, from the very outset of saying or the first appearance of the event, there is iterability and return in absolute uniqueness and utter singularity, means that the arrival of the *arrivant*—or the coming of the inaugural event—can only be greeted as a return, a coming back, a spectral *revenance*.

If I had the time here—but I could come back to it during the discussion—I'd try to tie in this theme of *revenance*—which echoes what was said earlier about Rilke, Celan, and Primo Levi—to tie in what I'm saying here about *revenance* and spectrality to the experience of impossibility that haunts the possible. Even when something comes to pass as possible, when an event occurs as possible, the fact that it will have been impossible, that the possible invention will have been impossible, this impossibility continues to haunt the possibility. My relationship to the event is such that in the experience that I have of the event, the fact that it will have been impossible in its structure continues to haunt the possibility. It remains impossible; it may have taken place but it's still impossible. If I've forgiven without knowing it, without saying it, especially without saying it to the other, if I've forgiven, the forgiving must still be impossible, it must remain forgiveness for the unforgivable. If when I forgive, the wrongdoing, the injury, the wound, the offense become forgivable because I've forgiven, then it's over; there's no forgiveness anymore. The unforgivable must remain unforgivable in for-

giveness, the impossibility of forgiving must continue to haunt forgiveness and the impossibility of giving continue to haunt giving. This haunting is the spectral structure of this experience of the event; it is absolutely essential.

It so happens that over the past two years I've been giving seminars in Paris on hospitality. We've examined, notably from an anthropological standpoint, certain hospitality rites among ancient populations in Mexico in which women were expected to cry upon the arrival of the other, of the guest. Usually, in hospitality rites, you smile when you greet a guest. Smiles or laughter are expected. You don't greet someone hospitably with a hostile or tense look; you're expected to smile. But there, the women were expected to cry when guests arrived (French guests in the case we were studying, based on a story from Jean de Léry's travels). What are we to make of these tears? It is said that the women regarded the newcomers as revenants, as the ghosts of the dead coming back, and so they were to be greeted as revenants, with tears of mourning. There is a certain affinity between hospitality and mourning. The one who comes, even if I welcome him or her beyond my capacity to welcome, the coming of the one who comes is to be greeted as a coming back—and what is true for the *arrivant* is equally true for the event. This does not mean to say that the coming is not new. It is new. The coming is absolutely new. But the novelty of this coming implicates in and of itself the coming back. When I welcome a visitor, when I receive the visitation of an unexpected visitor, it must be a unique experience each and every time for it to be a unique, unpredictable, singular, and irreplaceable event. But at the same time, the repetition of the event must be presupposed, from the threshold of the house and from the arrival of the irreplaceable. "I welcome you," means, "I promise you to welcome you again." It will not do to greet someone saying, "it's all right this time, but. . . ." There must already be a promise of repetition. Just as in the "yes," when I say, "yes" to someone, the repetition of the "yes" must immediately be implicated. The "yes, I do" that I say when I get married, to take the performative example again, this first, singular, and unique "yes" must implicate right away my readiness to confirm the "yes" not only a moment later, but tomorrow, and the day after, and until the end of life. The repetition of the "yes" must be implicated from the initial moment of the first "yes." Likewise, repetition must already be at work in the singularity of the event, and with the repetition, the erasure of the first occurrence is already underway—whence loss, mourning, and the posthumous, sealing the first moment of the event, as originary. Mourning is already there. One cannot avoid mixing tears with the smile of hospitality. Death is on the scene, in a way.

In conclusion, before opening the discussion, I'd say that these thoughts on the possible-impossible, the fact that it was necessary to answer "Is saying

the event possible?" by at once *yes* and *no*, *possible*, *impossible*, *possible* as *impossible*, should move us to rethink the whole question of this value of *possibility* that marks our Western philosophical tradition. The history of philosophy is the history of reflections on the meaning of the *possible*, on the meaning of *being* or *being possible*. This great tradition of the *dynamis*, of potentiality, from Aristotle to Bergson, these reflections in transcendental philosophy on the conditions of possibility, are affected by the experience of the event insofar as it upsets the distinction between the possible and the impossible, the opposition between the possible and the impossible. We should speak here of the im-possible event, an im-possible that is not merely impossible, that is not merely the opposite of possible, that is also the condition or chance of the possible. An im-possible that is the very experience of the possible. This means transforming the conception, or the experience, or the saying of the experience of the possible and the impossible. I do not believe that this is simply a subject of speculation for professional philosophers. To return to the subject of information, if we want to rethink what's happening today with the virtualization and the spectralization in the technical field of image or of perception, to rethink the virtual event, we'll have to upset our logic of the possible and the impossible—and at bottom, "Is saying the event possible?" is also, for the question of virtuality, "What is a virtual event?" and we have been unable until now to think of eventhood and virtuality as the same. This is the direction in which I would have headed, if we had had the time, to tie in what I was saying before about a political critique of information, of the *saying the event* according to the news, or for that matter, according to science or techno-science, together with what we've just been saying about the virtuality of the possible-impossible.

[Question – a question from the audience about the following statement by Bachelard]

"Wanting is wanting what one cannot." I find the statement very beautiful and very true. This may be the direction I'd like to take. I can't recreate Bachelard's context. If I had to interpret or discuss his statement, maybe wrongly, at any rate if I wanted to make it my own, I'd have to change it. Because I'd say that what I cannot, and hence the impossible that exceeds my ability and my power, is precisely what I cannot *want*. Unless we are going to transform the traditional concept of will. I am keeping here to the moment when the experience of the event defeats my will. If I want what I want, what I can want—the will to power—is commensurate with my decision. I'm tempted on the contrary by a conception of decision—I didn't

actually pronounce the word *decision* before, but that's really what I was thinking about—something that would also transform the logic of decision. Just as we say “I give” and “I forgive” too easily, we also easily say, “I decide” or “I take responsibility” or “I'm responsible.” These statements are all equally inadmissible. To say “I decide,” to say “you know that I decide, I know that I decide,” means that I am capable of deciding and master of my decision, that I have a criterion that allows me to say that I'm the one who decides. If this is true, the decision is a sort of expression of my power, of my possibility. And a decision that I am capable of and that expresses my possible does not interrupt anything, it does not tear the fabric of the possible, disrupt the course of history, as a decision ought to do. It's not a decision worthy of the name.

A decision should tear—that's what the word *decision* means; it should disrupt the fabric of the possible. Whenever I say “my decision” or “I decide,” you can be sure that I'm mistaken. The decision should always be—and I know that this proposition seems unacceptable according to traditional logic—the decision should always be the other's decision. My decision is, in fact, the other's decision. This does not exempt or exonerate me from responsibility. My decision can never be mine; it's always the other's decision in me, and in a way I am passive in the decision-making. For my decision to be an event, for it to disrupt my power, my ability, my possibility, for it to disrupt the normal course of history, I must undergo my decision, which is evidently logically unacceptable. I'd like therefore to develop the idea of decision as always the other's decision, because I'm responsible for the other and it's for the other that I decide; it is the other who decides in me, without in any way exonerating me from “my” responsibility. This is why Lévinas always puts freedom after responsibility. If I want what I cannot, this willing must be stripped of what traditionally clothes the will and determines it as will, namely agency, control, the “I want what I want.” For Bachelard's statement to be acceptable, it must in return destroy, deconstruct, or undo the very concept of willing. This is probably what Bachelard meant in this paradoxical statement: wanting what one cannot, even what one cannot want.

As far as Jankélévitch is concerned, naturally I was thinking of him, as one should when dwelling on the subject of forgiveness, and I was also, as you understood, thinking of the example of the unforgivable Holocaust; there are other unforgivables. It's not only because of my hardness, my inflexibility, and my unyielding condemnation that I can't say “I forgive,” it's because I simply don't have the right to forgive. It's always the other who has to forgive. I cannot forgive on the other's behalf. I cannot forgive in the name of the victims of the Holocaust. Even survivors, people like Primo

Levi who were there, who lived through it and survived, even they have no right to forgive. It is not simply because one must keep on condemning but because one can't forgive for others. We haven't the right to forgive: forgiving is impossible. Forgiving only means something if it is forgiving the unforgivable; this is when forgiveness can take place, if it takes place. In a dominant anthropo-theological structure, one generally says, "God alone can forgive; I don't have the right to forgive." A finite being cannot forgive a wrong that is always infinite. Unforgivable means infinite. Here God's name names the Other to whom the right to forgive is always left, as is the possibility to give, to say, "I give," "I decide." Giving or forgiving is always done in the name of the other.

[Two questions are asked, one concerning the use of the infinitive in the seminar's title question, "*Dire l'événement*," the other regarding the secret in the event]

I'm not the author of the topic of our debate and so, like you, I find myself faced with this question and its literal formulation. And I too asked myself questions that were, in part, the same as yours. I must say that, ultimately, what is happening here, to the extent that it was unforeseeable, that it was unanticipated for me—since we improvised to a large extent—is that an event will have taken place. It is happening and it wasn't arranged in advance; a lot was arranged but not everything. It's an event insofar as what's happening was not predicted. Something is being said through this event and is being said of the event. As far as knowing who says it, the question remains open. Like you, I asked myself about this infinitive. Often it's the rhetoric of a title: a topic proposed for discussion, left in the infinitive, as if we were taking an examination. But the impersonal nature of the infinitive got me thinking in particular that when there is no one present, no subject of enunciation to say the event in one of the modes that I've mentioned, then the saying is no longer constative, theoretical, descriptive, or performative: it is symptomatic. I propose the word symptom as another term, beyond the telling of the truth or the performativity that produces the event. The event defeats both the constative and the performative, the "I know" and the "I think." The secret is at work in the story you told.<sup>2</sup> Whenever the event resists being turned into information or into a theoretical utterance, resists being known and made known, the secret is on the scene. An event is always secret, for the reasons that I've said; like giving or forgiving it must remain a secret. If I say, "I give," if giving becomes phenomenal or if it

2. See Robertson Davies, *Fifth Business* (New York, 1970).

appears, if forgiving appears, then there is no more giving or forgiving. The secret belongs to the structure of the event. Not the secret in the sense of something private, clandestine, or hidden, but the secret as that which doesn't appear. Beyond all forms of verification, beyond discourses of truth or knowledge, the symptom is a signification of the event over which nobody has control, that no consciousness, that no conscious subject can appropriate or control, neither in the form of a theoretical or judicative statement, nor in the form of a performative production. There is symptom in what's happening here, for instance: each of us is interpreting, foreseeing, anticipating, and feeling overwhelmed and surprised by what can be called events. Beyond the meaning that each of us can read into these events, if not enunciate, there is the symptom. Even the effect of truth or the search for truth is symptomatic in nature. We can offer analyses of such symptoms. You talked of differentiated forms of knowledge; one could speak of identifying positions of the subjects of enunciation, libidinal drives, or power strategies.

But beyond all this, there is the symptomatology; there is meaning that no theorem can exhaust. This notion of symptom, which I'd like to dissociate from its clinical or psychoanalytical code, is related to what I was saying before about verticality. A symptom is something that falls. It's what befalls us. What falls vertically on us is what makes a symptom. There is, in every event, secrecy and symptomatology. I think that Deleuze also speaks of the symptom in this regard. Discourse that corresponds to this quality of eventfulness that we're speaking about is always symptomatic or symptomatological, always a discourse on the unique, on the case, on the exception. An event is always exceptional. This is one possible definition of the event. An event must be exceptional, an exception to the rule. Once there are rules, norms, and hence criteria to evaluate this or that, what happens and what doesn't happen, there is no event. The event must be exceptional and the singularity of the exception without rules can only bring about symptoms. This doesn't mean that we have to give up knowing or philosophizing: philosophical knowledge accepts this aporia as something promising and not simply negative or paralyzing. This promising aporia takes the form of the possible-impossible, what Nietzsche called the "maybe." Nietzsche writes somewhere that what will be expected from philosophers in the future is an investigation of this "maybe" that classical philosophers always resisted. And this "maybe" is not simply an empirical modality: there are some terrible pages in Hegel on the "maybe" and on those who explore the "maybe" and whom he regards as empiricists. Nietzsche tries to conceive of a modality of "maybe" that would not be merely empirical. What I said of the possible-impossible is this "maybe." There "may be" giving, if there is any;

if there is, we shouldn't be able to speak of it, to be sure of it. Forgiveness "may be," the event "may be." In other words, this category of "maybe," between the possible and the impossible, belongs to the same configuration as that of the symptom or the secret. The difficulty is in adapting a consequent, theoretical discourse to modalities that seem to constitute so many challenges to knowledge and theory. The symptom, the "maybe," the possible-impossible, the unique as substitutable, singularity as reiterable, all seem to be nondialectizable contradictions; the difficulty is to find a discourse, that is not simply impressionistic or lacking in rigor, for structures that constitute so many challenges to traditional logic. Have I answered your question? "Maybe."

*[The questioner asks for clarification on the connection between the promise and the event]*

I made a passing allusion to the promise. It is the privileged example of all discourses on the performative in the theory of speech acts. When I say, "I promise," I'm not describing something else, I'm not saying anything, I'm doing something. It's an event. A promise is an event. The "I promise" produces the event; it does not refer to any preexisting event. The "I promise" is a saying that says nothing of a preexisting event and that produces the event. Speech act theorists take the example of the promise as one performative example among others. I'd be more inclined to say that any statement, any performative utterance involves a promise, and that the promise is not a performative among others. Whenever I address the other, when I say to the other "I'm talking to you," I'm already in a promise framework. I'm speaking to you means, "I promise to continue, to go to the end of the sentence; I promise to tell you the truth even if I lie"—and to lie, one must promise to tell the truth. The promise is the basic element of language. Saying the event in this case would not be saying an object that the event would be but saying an event that the saying produces. Serious theorists of speech acts maintain that a promise must always promise something good. One does not promise something bad: "promising" something bad is a threat not a promise. You don't say to someone, "I promise I'm going to kill you"; you say, "I promise I'll give you, I'll meet you, I'll be faithful, I'll be your husband or your wife." The promise always involves something good, something beneficial and favorable. If one were to pretend to promise something bad, it would be a threat in the guise of a promise. When a mother says to her child, "if you do this, I promise you a spanking," it's a threat not a promise. This is classical speech act theory: a promise is not a threat.

But I'd venture to claim that a promise must always be haunted by the

threat, by its becoming-threat, without which it is not a promise. If I'm sure that what I'm promising is a good thing, than the good can not turn to bad, the promised gift can not turn into poison, according to the old logic of the *gift-Gift's* reversal, from gift to poison, from a beneficial gift to harmful gift. If I were sure that the promise was good and could not turn into something bad, then it would not be a promise. A promise has to be threatened by the possibility of being broken, of betraying itself, consciously or unconsciously. If there's no possibility of being perverted, if the good is not pervertible, then it's not good. For a promise to be possible, it must be haunted or threatened by the possibility of being broken or of being bad. Speech act theorists are serious people: they would say that if I promise to be at an appointment, *if I don't mean it*, if I'm lying, if I already know that I won't make it to the appointment, that I won't do everything I can to be there, then it's not a promise. A promise must be serious, it must correspond to a serious intention, at least when I say, "I'll be at the appointment tomorrow" in the form of a promise not a forecast. There are two ways of saying "tomorrow I'll be there": there is the forecast, "tomorrow morning I'll have breakfast," and there is "I'll be with you tomorrow morning for breakfast," which is something else. A promise must be serious to be a real promise according to speech act theorists; in other words, it must bind me to do everything I can to keep my promise, and it must be a promise of something good. I'd argue that if such a promise is not intrinsically pervertible, that is to say, threatened by the possibility of not being serious or sincere, or of being broken, then it's not a promise. A promise that cannot be broken, isn't a promise: it's a forecast, a prediction. The possibility of betrayal or perversion must be at the heart of the commitment to a promise and the distinction between promise and threat can never be assured. What I'm maintaining here is not a matter of abstract speculation.

We know from experience that a gift can be threatening, that the most benevolent promise can in itself become corrupt, that I can do harm in promising good; we could give several examples of this intrinsic possibility. Pervertibility has to be at the heart of that which is good, of the good promise, for the promise to be what it is. It must have the capability of not being a promise, of being broken, for it to be possible, to have the chance of being possible. This threat is not a bad thing; it's its chance. Without the threat, there would be no promise. If the promise was automatically kept, it would be a machine, a computer, a computation. For a promise not to be a mechanical computation or programming, it must have the capability of being betrayed. This possibility of betrayal must inhabit even the most innocent promise.

To this, I would add—and this is of even graver significance—that

whereas the performative says and produces the event that it speaks of, it neutralizes it too, insofar as it maintains control over it in an “I can,” an “I may,” etc. A pure event, worthy of the name, defeats the performative as much as the constative. One day we’ll have to come to terms with what this means.

To come back to what I was saying about justice at the beginning—since I began by speaking of this “yes,” of this justice in Lévinas—justice itself must be affected or haunted by its opposite, by perjury, for it to be justice. If, for example, in the face-to-face—which is the condition of respect of the other, of ethics, of what Lévinas calls the face of the other—if the Third were not already present in the face-to-face, justice, which is the relationship with the other, would already be perjury. Conversely, whenever the Third enters the dual relationship that engages me in a face-to-face with the singular other, there is already perjury. Hence, there is no simple opposition between perjury and justice, a solemn vow, commitment, or an oath. Perjury has to be at the heart of the oath for the oath to be truly possible. It must be at the heart of justice in an irremovable way, not as a passing attribute or an accident that can be erased. The possibility of evil, or of perjury, must be intrinsic to good or to justice for either to be possible. And so the impossible must be at the heart of the possible.

*[Question with regard to information, the verticality of the event, and technical mechanisms]*

In the interpretation, reappropriation, and filtering of information, it seems to me that the event, if there is one, is what resists this reappropriation, transformation, or trans-information. You took the Gulf War as an example. I underlined the fact that what was happening there, which we were told was being reported live, could not be reduced to this interpretative information, this trans-information, but neither could it be reduced to a simulacrum. I do not at all agree with Baudrillard who says that the war did not take place. The event that is ultimately irreducible to media appropriation and digestion is that thousands of people died. These are singular events each and every time, which no utterance of knowledge or information could reduce or neutralize. I’d say that we must ceaselessly analyze the mechanisms of what I’ve just dubbed trans-information or reappropriation, the becoming-simulacrum or becoming-televisual of events, analyze them in politico-historical terms, without forgetting, if possible, that an event took place that cannot under any circumstance be reduced to its analysis, an event that cannot be reduced to any saying. It’s the unsayable: the dead, *for example*, the dead.

As for the verticality that worries you, I'm well aware of the fact that the foreigner is also the one who arrives by way of the border, who is seen coming. Foreigners are seen coming mainly by customs and immigration officers and all those who want to control the immigration flow. When I have more time in a seminar or when I'm fighting for things like that in France, I make these things a bit more complicated, more than I'm doing here. I'm aware that this horizontality must be taken into account and of all that this calls for on our part. By verticality, what I meant was that the foreigner, what is irreducibly *arrivant* in the other—who is not simply a worker, or a citizen, or someone easily identifiable—is that which in the other gives me no advance warning and which exceeds precisely the horizontality of expectation. What I wanted to emphasize, in speaking of verticality, was that the other does not wait. She does not wait for me to be able to receive her or to give her a resident's permit. If there is unconditional hospitality, it has to be open to the visitation of the other who may come at any time, without my knowledge. This is also the messianic: the messiah can arrive, he can come at any time, from on high, where I don't see him coming. In my discourse, the idea of verticality doesn't necessarily have anymore the often religious or theological use that rises to the Most High. Maybe religion starts here. You can't talk the way I do about verticality, about absolute *arrivance*, without the act of faith having already commenced—and the act of faith is not necessarily religion, a given religion—without a certain space of faith without knowledge, faith beyond knowledge. I'd accept, therefore, that we speak of faith here.