

MEETING

A.W. METCALFE

Andrew Metcalfe works in the School of Sociology at the University of New South Wales. With his colleague Ann Game, he wrote *Passionate Sociology* (Sage, London, 1996), and they have just completed another book entitled *Doing Nothing and Other Ways of Being*.

***Address:* School of Sociology,
University of New South Wales,
Sydney 2052
Australia
e-mail: A.Metcalfe@unsw.edu.au**

MEETING

ABSTRACT: An intersection is never simply a meeting of two horizontal axes. There is always a vertical axis, which positions the meeting in terms of such eternal issues as fate, chance, communion, revelation, prophecy, vocation. This article tests these religious conceptions in terms of the most ordinary of meetings in apparently secular society: what happens to self and being in the few seconds after the doorbell or telephone rings? Who is calling and what is being demanded? Why do so many of us screen our phone calls?

KEYWORDS: middle, ethics, calling, preposition, eternity, doors, prophecy

*Then said Jesus unto them again, Verily, verily, I say unto you, I am the door
(John 10: 7)*

I was crossing a little stream near Inchy Wood and actually in the middle of a stride from bank to bank, when an emotion never experienced before swept down upon me. I said, 'That is what the devout Christian feels, that is how he surrenders his will to the will of God.' (Yeats, in Gollancz, 1964: 271)

The sign of the cross is about meetings and every meeting is a potential crisis. Whenever paths cross, there are moments when identity is suspended because, not knowing where we're going, we don't know where -- and who -- we've been. The cross signifies death and birth at once: after an experience of the crossroads, we're never the same.

This drama is played out architecturally in Christian churches designed in the shape of a cross. There, at the dramatic point of meeting, is Christ on the cross: Christ is the substance of the space in-between this and that path, in-between self and other. The crossroads insist both on the importance of division, difference and infinite possibility, and on the connections always between us. In the Christian tradition this coming together is through the figure, blood and body of Christ, the universal connector.

The cross at the crossroads of the church demonstrates, through its vertical orientation, that a point of juncture is never simply a meeting of two horizontal axes. Like the church steeple and the baroque dome frescoed with scenes of heaven and hell, the cross at the centre of a church acts as a cosmic axis: the ways of the world meet where a vertical axis passes, connecting the horizontal crossing to the worlds of the gods above and the dead below. The vertical axis is timeless, linking all who are with all who have been and will be, on the basis of their shared mortality. The church is the place where we meet, and meet with God, for births, weddings and deaths, but it is also the place where births, weddings and deaths meet through the living presence of the eternal. Whatever unique line we think we're forging or following in life, we end where we began, where we find we always were, where we find eternity.

I am writing this at dusk in a twelve house hamlet in a mountainous part of Italy, to the sound of church bells. Within sight are three churches and within hearing, five. In the morning, at midday and dusk, the bells ring for the devotions of Angelus. Across the fields, through the valley, through the country, people simultaneously stop what they're separately doing and are brought together, and in coming together they feel in their words the presence of the angel whom the words represent. The bell that calls people to the Angelus is itself the angel; the miracle of the good news is again made flesh, at that moment:

The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary.

And she conceived of the Holy Spirit.

Behold the handmaid of the Lord.

Be it done unto me according to Thy word.

And the word was made flesh

And dwelt amongst us.

Walking around the olive groves and vineyards here, it is hard to imagine that the local farmers need reminder of the eternal. Look at the trees, the stones, the soil, the houses and the fields that need constant attention but also seem to have been here forever, unchanged; or trace the generational passages within the same small church cemetery; or watch the seasons pass and stay eternally unchanged: I get an overwhelming sense of the still and empty centre to the comings and goings, the intersections, the births and deaths, and the meetings, of everyday life. People belong here in an empty rather than self-centred way: this is theirs because of their relations with other people, it is theirs because they equally belong to it. Obligation and freedom meet. So when the church bells call, I imagine that most people recognise who is being called and what is required. The walking paths to the churches have been worn smooth by centuries of feet, by people who at times must resonate with Thomas Merton when he writes, simply, 'I am a bell' (quoted in Sheldrake and Fox, 1996: 103). And the same scene could be played out in any peasant society:

in Vietnam, each village temple had a big bell, like those in Christian churches in Europe and America. Whenever the bell was invited to sound ... all the villagers would stop what they were doing and pause for a few moments to breathe in and out in mindfulness.... We go back to ourselves and enjoy our breathing. Breathing in, we say, silently, 'Listen, listen,' and breathing out, we say, 'This wonderful sound brings me back to my true home.' (Nhat Hanh, 1996: 23)

But perhaps this scene could also be played out in Sydney, where I usually live, or in Tokyo or New York. Take for example the movies based on brief encounters on a train, in an Airport, on the Titanic, in the Grand Hotel: all these films are religious meditations on the themes of fate, chance, communion and mortality as lived in modern urban spaces and times. Concern with similar issues underlies the common

compulsion to catch the (good?) news on radio and television and newspapers throughout the day. Michel Serres (1995: 154) juxtaposes Millet's painting *The Angelus*, which features two peasants at prayer in the fields, with a photograph of two down-at-heel punters checking the race results on television, their heads bowed as they consider their betting cards and fate.

To test whether the Angelus bells might still call our attention to the eternal found in-between every intersection, I want to examine the bodily and emotional reactions in the few seconds between hearing and answering my doorbell or telephone. Do I have intimations of infinity, eternity, annunciation and revelation in the humblest meetings of my ordinary life? Even though religious terms have been banished from the intellectual lexicon of most residents of Sydney, I wonder if our hearts still beat to the demands of religious concerns.

Crisis

I have some precious time free from outside obligations, and I'm working alone at home, lost in my thoughts. *And then, suddenly*, there's a knock at the door. Or the telephone calls. However commonplace these events, they are also the archetypal mechanisms for staging my life. The doorbell prompts drama's primal question: *What's going to happen?* And then suddenly, momentarily, I'm a child face to face with primal dread: *Someone's coming to get me!* I groan queasily.

Time and action hold their breath and my concentration dissipates. *What was I doing?*, I ask myself, but it's too late to return. Action and purpose now pulse outside, waiting to enter, while I'm in the shadow zone behind the footlights, where reality, disbelief, time and space are suspended. No longer an actor in a believable world, I await the entrance of events that happen elsewhere. All my attention focuses on the door, which has become a stage curtain that will open to reveal the next stage in my life.

Who is it?

Who is it? I thought I knew where my day and life were going, but the doorbell has exposed me to a future suddenly open and contingent. The person at my door could be beggarman or thief; it could be Archangel Gabriel, the Angel of Death or a person with good news from the lottery office. And even if I knew who it was, I could never know the call's full significance, for only The End, the position I anticipate but cannot occupy, allows a final distinction between the vital clue and the red herring. How was poor Coleridge to know the fate embodied in the inconsequential visitor from Porlock, whose interruption truncated the poet's masterpiece, *Kubla Khan*?

Yet, strangely, the openness is doubly bound to a dreadful sense of closure. For a start, the future is not like the tomorrow that never comes, not something I'm trying to catch; the future, already determined, has impatiently doubled back to catch me! Instead of being propelled by causes, my life feels under the sway of strange attractors that lead it to its destiny. The doorbell announces more than the claim that *something is about to happen*: it also brings a frightening sense that *something has already happened*. I wait, powerless and exposed, as if between the flash of lightning and the crash of thunder, for the arrival of events that have *already happened* elsewhere. In a humiliating affront to my desire for privacy and autonomy, I realise that other people, watching the other stage, already know more than I about my future.

Prepositions

But there's more to the sense of fate. The question *Who is it?* doesn't precede the groan, and the groan isn't a recognition of the implications of the question. My stomach first goes to jelly, and *then* I emerge from the swoon with this question in mind. The swoon comes from a certainty that precedes doubt by a split second. When I say *Someone's coming to get me!*, I'm not flagging a concern with the specific or

singular identity of the caller. At some stage my visitor will take a single identity, become some particular one, but before that the visitor is nonetheless known to me: the caller is, precisely, *Someone*. In my mind's eye, I can see their bulk, their cloak, their walking staff, their featureless face.

In French, *préposé* refers to an agent or clerk, and often a postman, while *préposer* means 'to put somebody in a position to carry out a function' (Serres, 1995: 139). The grammatical term preposition refers, likewise, to the small, almost invisible words that have the quicksilver ability to establish the relationships required by the prominent parts of speech. Prepositions remind us, then, of the relational embeddedness of poses and positions: they are like angels, '[w]eaving space, constructing time, ... the precursors of every presence.... there even before the fact of being there' (Serres, 1995:146-7). Prepositions don't come first in any chronological sense, for they are contentless, and yet they must be already there if I'm to meet any one.

As a *préposé*, my visitor, *Someone*, is no *one*, is an empty oneness, a no-one. *Someone* isn't any *one* but *every* one: they are beggar and thief, Gabriel and Death and the person from the lottery office. *Someone*'s meaning is not in the particular things that some particular one will finally say: it is in the latter's very arrival to say it. Normally, however, because of my dread of the nothingness of *Someone*, and because the particular one who follows is so noisy and individual, I allow the latter to divert my attention from the silent invisible no-one who pre-posed me and the other.

Doom

Sounding like divine door knocks, the four shattering notes that announce Beethoven's Fifth Symphony are enough to make me cower before a dramatic but also strangely archaic sense of doom; a film director like Hitchcock need only focus his camera on a door or telephone to produce an excruciating suspense that is specific to

the movie's context but also evocative of a primordial terror that cannot be remembered because it hasn't occurred in chronological time.

The visitor at my door, likewise, carries two messages, one in what they say, and a prepositional one in the very possibility of their arrival. Regardless of what they say, or who they are specifically, as a *préposé* they call my attention to the connections and responsibilities that embed or hold me as a matrix. The future is not only (just) *out there*, already waiting for me, it is calling on me to acknowledge the eternal nothingness that holds us apart and together. With a sickly chill of doom, like the sleeper groaning at the sound of the morning alarm clock, I *know* for whom the doorbell rings, I *know* who calls, I *know* what they want.

The swoon is too brief and unsettling to be analysed at the time, but when I later try to reconstruct its elements I find a blend of apprehension, terror, shame, wonder and hope. The concerns of the church bell still echo in alarm clocks, door bells and telephones. All are calls awakening me to the moment.

What do they want from me?

When the swoon has washed over me, I pull myself together, grumbling like Ebenezer Scrooge. *Who is it this time? Just leave me alone. What do they want now? Who do they think I am?* This aggressive tone may bluff some people, including me, but its defensiveness confirms that I know what my queasy stomach meant. After Marley's ghost first appeared in the form of his door-knocker, Scrooge sought safety by double-locking himself inside the house. When Marley appears again, Scrooge is coldly defensive and caustically dismissive, denying the existence of ghosts, claiming the apparition is a product of indigestion ('more gravy than grave'). Nevertheless, '[t]he truth is, that he tried to be smart, as a means of distracting his own attention, and keeping down his terror; for the spectre's voice disturbed the very marrow in his bones' (Dickens, 1980: 21).

Like Scrooge, Jean-Paul Sartre knows what the other wants before the other is even identified. 'Hell is other people', he claimed, and in *Being and Nothingness* he locates hell in a public park. He imagines sitting there, in the park, grass and trees around him. He's the centre of his park and universe. *And then, suddenly*, another man passes, and the objects of Sartre's universe regroup around the newcomer, tipping Sartre from Eden and leaving him outside a relation he cannot apprehend. The very deep, raw green of the grass 'turns toward the Other a face which escapes me', Sartre says. 'Thus suddenly an object has appeared which has stolen the world from me... [I]t appears that the world has a kind of drain hole in the middle of its being and that it is perpetually flowing off through this hole' (1992: 342-3).

Calling

Like a gambler who knows he is doomed, even as he hopes for the best, I know the other at my door wants *everything* that constituted and was constituted by my world. They want me to change my life. No, more: they ask me to give up my sense of living *my* life in *my* world. They are not just 'dropping in', as our secular and individualist society has it: they are knocking down my walls, calling on me to take up the vocation they offer. *This is your path!* they instruct, leaving me with no choice in a decision that has already occurred off stage. They mark both the continuation and alteration of my life: the ending and beginning of its stages. When a door opens it closes the life I thought I was leading.

As George Steiner implies, the encounter always involves the logics of invasion, abduction, rape and sex:

the shorthand image is that of an Annunciation, of 'a terrible beauty' or gravity breaking into the small house of our cautionary being. If we have heard rightly the wing-beat and provocation of that visit, the house is no longer habitable in quite the same way as it was before. A mastering intrusion has shifted the light (1991: 143).

I may be left with nothing, and this will seem a void if I'm attached to the things of the life that is changed, as Scrooge is to his money. In this case the door's opening will involve a theft. If I am not so attached, the nothing which the other leaves me may seem their gift. They have opened me up to the fullness of the no-thingness that is God.

A responsibility before my freedom

If the other's call on my world *simply* made me feel self-righteous or the victim of theft, as my Sartrean or Scroogean tone pretends, I wouldn't first react to the doorbell with a swoon. The swoon is my recognition that I *owe* everything to the other.

People collecting money for charity are often known as 'doorknockers'; an archetypal meeting in the street is a meeting with a beggar: in a sense the other in *any* encounter makes the bottomless demand of the mendicant, even if they are delivering news of that lottery win. Rather than being a measure of our responsibility, the particular donation we make is a toll paid to beggars who allow us hurry by self-centredly, pretending we don't know the responsibility we'd recognise in their eyes. I might rather keep the beggar at this distance, outside the domain of my life and home, but after the doorbell it's too late. In its ringing affirmation that the beggar and I are already connected, the doorbell has left me utterly exposed.

This is not a responsibility whose origin can be located within an historical chronology or ascribed to a preexisting identity or debt. I owe the other everything not because they are the same as me, as Australians, say, or humans, but because we're in relation, both connected *and* different. The rightful demands of the other derive not from commitments I've made or sins I've committed, but from a prepositional ethics, an empty rather than an identifiable oneness, an immemorial connectedness.

Face to face

According to the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, such demands are the epiphany of the face to face encounter to which the doorbell calls me. The other's face is 'signification without context', for it doesn't identify the other as a character, by name or gender or occupation or nationality or family. Instead the face is 'meaning all by itself. You are you. In this sense one can say that the face is not "seen". It is what cannot become a content, which your thought would embrace; it is uncontainable, it leads you beyond' (Levinas, 1985: 86).

Sometimes, for example, when conducting some business with a colleague or shop assistant, I might make the tactical error of noticing the soft freckles on their nose, and these lead me on to see *beyond* the freckles and the other particular characteristics of their face, beyond their suit and their job and persona, to their unbearable and heartbreaking vulnerability and openness. These moments melt with tenderness precisely because they remind me of the other who is always beyond my grasp. The other's face, then, is 'exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence', but it prohibits the possibility of violence in the same moment it raises it. As Levinas puts it,

the relation to the face is straightaway ethical. The face is what one cannot kill, or at least it is that whose *meaning* consists in saying: 'thou shalt not kill'....

There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all. And me, whoever I may be, but as a 'first person', I am he who finds the resources to respond to the call.

(1985: 86-9)

Anxiety

When the doorbell reminds me that it doesn't fundamentally *matter* who is knocking, I have an awful sense of doom, of both *pre*-positional nothingness and of the achronological End: I know what the visitor means, *whoever it is*, whether or not I welcome their arrival. It would often be a relief to be able to ignore this dreadful prepositional call through a focus on the particular position of the caller. This would allow me to hold onto a notion of my own individuality and primacy. At the first sound of the doorbell, I moan with a sense of doom, but then try to save myself by clinging anxiously to the question *Who is it?* as it floats past in the wreckage. I try to persuade myself that it is this anxious question rather than a sense of doom that is at the centre of my unease.

I surround myself with paraphernalia to direct my attention to this self-defensive question. So, for example, fearful of the telephone's call on my imagined future and self, I might use a silent number or call monitoring or an answering machine to screen out calls that ask too much of me; I might manage my encounters by returning others' calls when forewarning lets me pose my own emotional terms and speak to a *particular* person. Likewise, to protect myself from naked prepositional otherness, to give me the opportunity to compose myself in terms of a particular persona, I might use a spyhole in my door, or security bars, or a security camera and intercom, or the buffer of a receptionist or waiting room or a schedule of appointments. *Who is it?*, I call through the closed door when the knock comes at an especially vulnerable time. I feel security when I can compose an appropriate self before speaking.

Shame

Scrooge's selfishness is a common response to these demands of the other, but another familiar response is demurrals based not on my worth but my unworthiness. I

know that the other is deserving, but doubt that I can give what they deserve. This was the response of Moses who, when called by God to lead his people from Egypt, became painfully aware of his slow and awkward tongue. Describing his experience of depression, the publisher Victor Gollancz refers, likewise, to the shame that made him unable to answer the calls of the world:

The essence of my hell was outlawry. By the sin which, as I felt, I had committed, I had broken the links that united me with universal living: I was separate, alone, without lot or part in the everything. I had deprived myself, treacherously, of it; I had deprived it, quite as treacherously, of me. The smell of the grass was still there, but was now all the more alien for its sweetness; the sun still shone, but not for me.... Most anguishing of all was my relation to music. I had betrayed it.... The shame I should feel in its presence was something I should be unable to bear. So I kept away. (1964: 24)

But I wonder about the modesty of this shameful demurrer. Although shame denies it involves the aggression of Scrooge's self-righteousness, it may derive from the same terror and involve the same defensive and faithless 'holding back'. What did Moses and Gollancz think was required of them? Aren't they thinking, like Scrooge, in terms of the attributes they possess? Doesn't their insistence on shame preserve a private self that God and Paradise have neither touched nor known? In treating some aspect of themselves as abject, to be shamefully rejected, they proudly withhold this kernel ('And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God'). This is a passive form of Scrooge's aggressive defence.

Love's welcome

Rather than primarily requiring me to use my resources to remedy their lack, the other's naked face demands that I *be* with them, listening and responding to them openly and spontaneously; it demands that I set aside who I thought I was and where I

intended to go. When the other demanded ‘everything’, Scrooge, Moses and Gollancz apparently mistook this for an accounting term, but it is self, place and world that are at stake. The other calls me to an economics of gift and feast and abundance, and not an economics of totality, attachment and scarcity. In this relationship, as Scrooge finally discovers to his wonderment and joy, everything and nothing aren’t opposites: by giving everything without attachment he gains the everything, in Gollancz’s sense: by giving everything he comes to want for nothing.

If this is the case, then Gollancz’s comment invites a reappraisal of Sartre’s, so close are their discussions of hell. Perhaps the disintegration in a Sartrean hell *doesn’t* occur because the world turns away from me. Perhaps this hell is an apocalyptic sulk, a defence of a wilful self threatened by loving welcome of a larger cosmos. Perhaps the self throws up obstacles whenever it fears being lost in a smoothly flowing social current. The feelings of being unworthy and rejected are self-protective obstacles that guard against love’s welcome.

Defences

There are so many other ways to avoid this responsibility to the other. I can be reserved, or blasé, or intellectual, or mean, or flippant, or aloofly well-mannered, or defensive, or jumpy, or purposive, or officious, or insensitive, or obtuse, or preoccupied, or self-righteous, or cynical, or smart, or knowing, or practical, or sensible, or objective, or distant; I can organise my timetable and accommodation and travelling routes to minimise the possibility of impertinent encounters. The other calls me to encounter, but I rarely accept the call.

Why do I routinely turn away? Because my secular understandings of self and place and time are at stake. If I’m open to the encounter, I can no longer recognise myself as a subject in Euclidean space and chronological time: I am not a free agent, distant from the other; time does not move in a line from origin to end; events cannot be explained according to a causal logic based on antecedence; meaning doesn’t derive

from a process of representation; mystery is neither the opposite of knowledge nor a lack to be filled with knowledge; I have to forgo the notion of a separate consciousness that can be an origin or a source of creativity. When I forgo these conventional understandings of my place in the world, I fear the shame of lost control, and also the apparent violence of being swept away. I turn from the encounter with new life because I'm afraid of the death that accompanies it. Like T.S. Eliot's magi, I had thought birth and death were different, but 'this birth was hard and bitter agony, like Death, [my] death' (1961:98).

The gambler's certainty

Scrooge struggles on when he knows his fate is sealed, his caustic guardedness a matter of pride and habit. Despite my brave face, I too feel hollow on my way to the door. I'm aware of my surface because aware that there is nothing behind it. This is a split between doom and anxiety, between the certainty of my loss of self and the anxious uncertainty about the form of my self. Although I'm attending to the nervous questions *who is it?* and *what do they want?*, and trying to insist on a limited interpretation of these questions, I'm not convinced by my own anxiety.

With this combination of doom and anxiety, I'm a gambler who has staked everything on the question posed by a turn of the roulette wheel. Pascal argued that the belief in God was a wager, but God's existence is the vitality of and not only the outcome of a wager. As a form of divination, gambling is a devotional exercise that brings to life questions of fate and faith and meaning. I anxiously watch the wheel spin, but as I wait my anxiety gives way to a voluptuous feeling of renunciation and lost control. The mystery of the gamble has become a rapturous form of certainty. While I await the outcome of the spin I feel myself as putty carried in the sure hands of Luck, Fate, Probability or God.

At one level I'm focussing on the mystery as something I *don't know*, but at a deeper level I'm learning that the mystery is something I *know*: gambling teaches us the

substance of mystery, the inviolability of otherness, the tangibility of nothing. Awaiting revelation, thrilled with hope and dread, I vividly experience the *mysterium tremendum* that marks the presence of the Holy. Accordingly, at the heart of doubt I find not chaos but things vivid with their sense of being in place. A strange calm takes hold at the centre of my gambler's anxiety. The spin won't alter my fate but only reveal its vehicle. In gambling, the stakes are always religious, it is always a matter of my life. However much I pretend that my risk is driven by a desire for self-aggrandisement, I know I am going to lose. And this is also what I want.

Suspense

So, by the time I answer the knock, it's already too late, I already know I'm lost, whether I welcome or resist the loss. Perhaps this is why it feels that the future has *already* happened. The reverberations of the hand knocking on the door pass right through the door: the other enters my flimsy shelter simply through their announcement of a desire to enter. Before I know it, the first encounter has already occurred, my previous world has drained away under the door, and I know the emptiness on which the posing of my character depends.

The simple chronological sense that 'something is going to happen' has already been prepositionally complicated by a sense of doom -- *something has already happened* -- which replaces doubt with certainty and the future with eternity. But despite this doom, there remains a dramatic sense of events unfolding: at the same time as the doorbell announces that the future has come to meet me, and is already there, it draws my attention to the passage ahead of me which I must travel to reach the door. Although I feel I know what awaits me on the other side of the door, I approach it with a sense of the tremendous mystery to be revealed. Hitchcock's camera might focus on my hand reaching for the doorknob. Closer. Closer. And then....

I am in a condition of suspense, where identifications of time, place and self are deferred or held in play.

Prophecy

Doors always promise that something is about to happen, but behind the specific event is the eerie and awesome sense that *something is about to happen*. Psychics and paranoid schizophrenics are renowned for discerning these uncanny messages in the background noise, but ordinary acts of interpretation also rely on this capacity. Only the autistic are deaf to the *something more* that turns the visit into visitation, the sign into wonder, that transforms any Porlock into a prophet with a message from God, from the larger realm:

‘But if it is Porlock, then it must be something of the very first importance’

‘Who then is Porlock?’ I asked.

‘Porlock, Watson, is a nom-de-plume, a mere identification mark; but behind it lies a shifty and evasive personality. In a former letter he frankly informed me that the name was not his own, and defied me ever to trace him among the teeming millions of this great city. Porlock is important, not for himself, but for the great man with whom he is in touch. Picture to yourself the pilot fish with the shark, the jackal with the lion - anything that is insignificant in companionship with what is formidable: not only formidable, Watson, but sinister. . . . You have heard me speak of Professor Moriarty?’ (Doyle, 1975: 16)

Sherlock Holmes’ expectations are based on his interpretation of empirical evidence, and so are my feelings for the prophetic or revelatory significance of the other at my door. This evidence is often discounted, however, because it takes experiential form. I expect prophecy because the doorbell has brought about miraculous changes in the world, because the world seems charged with the presence of the divine. The term miracle isn’t a flowery gesture here: whether or not I say I believe in miracles, I have

actual sensations of them every day. As a *coup de théâtre*, the doorbell miraculously alters the space and time and state of being that I'd been taking for granted.

Self and other

When the doorbell rings, and prompts the question *Who is it?*, it simultaneously asks *And who am I?*, for I can only present an appropriate self to the other after I've anticipated their position in the encounter. Through this imaginary enactment, I adjust my presentation by evaluating how I will feel about the other and about the response I expect to call out from them. And not only that: my evaluation of my anticipation of *their* response is tempered by my reactions to their anticipated presentation. The encounter, then, isn't a meeting of two distinct beings: to meet, A and B must already possess or haunt each other, must acknowledge some archetypal sense of implication or belonging. I cannot meet a complete stranger because my self is always already predisposed toward them. This process is necessarily instructive. I'm learning who I am and should be from the other whose identity is still unknown to me. Outside my door, they still possess the secret, the inside, of me.

Me and I

Through this encounter with the other, who always exceeds any particular expectations I may have, I am also brought face to face with my own unpredictability (see Mead, 1934). How will I respond to them? Will I make some impulsive *faux pas* or become tongue-tied? Will I reveal something about me that I don't allow myself to acknowledge? Will they reveal something about me that I've not known before? Will I be ashamed of the platitudes and duplicities I hear myself utter in the course of exchange? Before the doorbell, I was gliding along, without a need to say what was me and what wasn't. Now the doorbell has called me to account. Am I ashamed of me? Should this me be ashamed of this I, even of this I's shame?

So the doorbell not only announces a meeting with the other, it heralds a meeting of 'I' and 'me' across the doorstep of the other who's waiting just outside. Once the door is opened, the other also opens, to connect the self-conscious 'me' with a strange and impulsive 'I' on its other side. My ability to hold a lively 'internal' conversation between 'I' and 'me' relies on this implied and 'external' other who comes between and is both inside and outside, same and not same. The other is the nothing that separates and connects the aspects of my life to allow their lively relation. I am apprehensive when the doorbell rings because the other introduces me to the aspects of my being that aren't organised into an identity.

Coming or going

In both these ways, through my relation to other and my relation to 'I', the doorbell suspends world and self by so changing space that I cannot tell where I begin or end or whether I am coming or going. This reformulation of the world is the miracle that makes us aware of the divine. When I try to retrieve myself by muttering Scrooge's aggressive-defensive question *Who do they think I am?*, I apparently ask it rhetorically, as if I know who I am, as if I am autonomous. But my gruff exterior is intended to hide my ignorance of the contents inside: the frightening thing for me is that it is a genuine question, expressing my need for the person coming to me with their needs. *Who is it?* and *what do they want?* entwine with *who am I?* and with *where am I?* My side of the door once held *me*, but the doorbell has announced and performed a shift in my location. I cannot distinguish the mystery outside from the mystery inside. In answering the doorbell, I find I'm locked outside myself, keenly aware of 'the unassuaged, unhoused instability and estrangement of [my] condition' (Steiner, 1991: 139). At such instants, we are 'strangers to ourselves, errant at the gates of our own psyche. We knock blindly at the doors of turbulence, of creativity, of inhibition within the *terra incognita* of our own selves' (Steiner, 1991: 139).

Outside chronology

Just as the doorbell destabilises inside and outside space, it syncopates time, producing a liminal time that suspends and upends chronology. I've said that the doorbell makes my future come early, forcing me to wait for my life to catch up with the fate that is already there on the other side of the door. But, more than this, because the future feels like an unfolding of the implications of the past, the other side of the door also holds the secrets of who I've been all along, whether or not I've known it. In approaching the door, 'I' react to my anticipation of the other who hasn't yet acted, so that the origin of my reactions is an event that hasn't yet occurred and won't occur at a point in Euclidean space or chronological time. And yet the inner qualities of this originary future are already known, because it has already occurred, in my imaginary encounter, and has already changed the world. In the topsy-turvy time of waiting, I anticipate my past while the future travels back to call on me. I go to the door in a slightly dazed condition, but preparing to meet my future and my past. I am expecting *all* to be revealed when the door opens.

Miraculous proof

With a simple ring, the door has quickened the cosmos and made time and space auspicious: the world trembles on the edge of a revelation of meaning and purpose and rebirth. Whereas, on other occasions, space seems pointlessly unmarked by time or measured in lines radiating from a fixed point of origin, the doorbell has miraculously made past, present, future and eternity converge at the doorstep. The doorstep is a holy place, a place of prophecy, where the horizontal secular world intersects with the vertical divine world. And time, since the doorbell rang, is also miraculously changed. It is no longer the disinterested and empty time of tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, for the knock has revealed a future that is intensely interested in me. It has come to collect me, to deliver a message.

By unsettling my secular self, the doorbell has opened me to the possibility of wonder. I trust that this is a prophetic visitation. A newly opened door promises a newly born world, glorious with significances indiscernible to a self that already knows its identity. The marks of the divine, of mystery at once known and unknowable, are fresh on the surface of things; the eternal and infinite are startlingly close at hand. If I'm not the centre of everything, if my own purposes are as inconsequential as those of the visitor from Porlock, I've received a sign that I'm a vital participant in the wider scheme of things. I go to the door not as someone leaving but as someone arriving at his predestined place. My sense of belonging has turned inside out.

Sometimes from far away

They sign to me;

A violet smiles from the dim verge of darkness,

A raindrop hangs beckoning on the eaves,

And once, in long wet grass,

A young bird looked at me. (Kathleen Raine, in Gollancz, 1964: 23)

The silence of the bells

People rarely talk of prophecy these days, yet we know it from the silence deep within the ringing bells. We learn from this silence that every meeting is a rendezvous with utter change, that the doorbell ushers the sacred and eternal into the everyday. There are rules and laws of proper behaviour in any society, but if the meeting occurs on the vital prepositional ground before these rules, if it occurs through the nakedness of the face to face encounter, without regard to the particular identities of self and other, any meeting is inspirational and revelatory. It demands everything from us but this, miraculously, turns out to be its gift.

The chronic noise and anxiety of metropolitan life is a fearful denial of this knowledge of silence. If I dismiss the significance of the everyday encounter, it's

because I recognise and dread the demanding glory of the divine; because in some unrecognised way I know that God is the other other, closer to me than I am to myself, whom I meet at every crossroad. I know enough of the presence of the divine to be afraid, but, in my pride, I know too much to know that there is nothing to fear: the open door shows life so vibrant, truth so tremendous and responsibility so awful that they seem certain to shatter my fragile self.

Deliverance

The person who comes also takes me away, delivering me my future and delivering me from the locked doors of the prison of self. Sometimes, feeling light-spirited and breezy, I welcome the refreshment of this chance opening. Sometimes the intrusion is rude and brutal, wounding me as it tears me away from whom I thought I was and what I thought I was doing. But sometimes I open the door and find my eyes too have opened wide. The sky astonishes me. Someone smiles at me and I'm awed by the tenderness of a humble greeting. I had thought I was home but how mistaken I'd been! Here I am! 'Our true home is in the present moment. The miracle is not to walk on water. The miracle is to walk on the green earth in the present moment' (Nhat Hanh, 1996: 23).

References

- Dickens, C. (1980) *A Christmas Carol and The Chimes*. London: Dent.
- Doyle, A.C. (1975) *The Valley of Fear*. London: Pan.
- Eliot, T.S. (1961) *Selected Poems*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Gollancz, V. ed. (1964) *From Darkness to Light*. London: Victor Gollancz.
- Levinas, E. (1985) *Ethics and Infinity*. Tr. R.A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, E. (1989) *The Levinas Reader*. Ed. S. Hand. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Mead, G.H. (1934) *Mind, Self, and Society*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Nhat Hanh, T. (1996) *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. London: Rider.
- Sartre, J-P. (1992) *Being and Nothingness*. Tr. H. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Serres, M. (1995) *Angels: A Modern Myth*. Tr. F. Cowper. Paris: Flammarion.
- Sheldrake, R. and Fox, M. (1996) *Natural Grace*. London: Bloomsbury
- Steiner, G. (1989) *Real Presences*. London: Faber and Faber.