

Performativity and Performance

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INTRODUCTION

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When is saying something doing something? And how is saying something doing something? If they aren't coeval with language itself, these questions certainly go as far back, even in European thought, as—take your pick—Genesis, Plato, Aristotle. Proximally, posed explicitly by the 1962 publication of the British philosopher J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*, they have resonated through the theoretical writings of the past three decades in a carnivalesque echolalia of what might be described as extraordinarily productive cross-purposes. One of the most fecund, as well as the most under-articulated, of such crossings has been the oblique intersection between performativity and the loose cluster of theatrical practices, relations, and traditions known as performance

(...)

A term whose specifically Austinian valences have been renewed in the work of Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, performativity has enabled a powerful appreciation of the ways that identities are constructed iteratively through complex citational processes. If one consequence of this appreciation has been a heightened willingness to credit a performative dimension in all ritual, ceremonial, scripted behaviors, another would be the acknowledgment that philosophical essays themselves surely count as one such performative instance. The irony is that, while philosophy has begun to shed some of its anti-theatrical prejudices, theater studies have been attempting, meanwhile, to take themselves out of (the) theater. Reimagining itself over the course of the past decade as the wider field of performance studies, the discipline has moved well beyond the classical ontology of the black box model. to embrace a myriad of performance practices, ranging from stage to festival and everything in between: film, photography, television, computer simulation, music, "performance art," political demonstrations, health care, cooking, fashion, shamanistic ritual. . . .,

Given these divergent developments, it makes abundant sense that performativity's recent history has been marked by cross-purposes. For while philosophy and theater now share "performative" as a common lexical item, the term has hardly come to mean "the same thing" for each.⁴ Indeed, the stretch between theatrical and deconstructive meanings of

"performative" seems to span the polarities of, at either extreme, the extroversion of the actor, the introversion of the signifier. Michael Fried's opposition between theatricality and absorption seems custom-made for this paradox about "performativity": in its deconstructive sense, performativity signals absorption; in the vicinity of the stage, however, the performative is the theatrical. But in another range of usages, a text like Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* uses "performativity" to mean an extreme of something like efficiency – postmodern representation as a form of capitalist efficiency—while, again, the deconstructive "performativity" of Paul de Man or J. Hillis Miller seen—is to be characterized by the dislinkage precisely of cause and effect—between the signifier and the world. At the same time, its worth keeping in mind that even in deconstruction, more can be said of performative speech-acts than that they are ontologically dislinked or introversively nonreferential. Following on de Man's demonstration of "a radical estrangement between the meaning and the performance of any text"(298), one might want to dwell not so much on the nonreference of the performative, but rather on (what de Man calls) its necessarily "aberrant" relation to, its own reference the torsion, the mutual. perversion, as one might say, of reference and performativity.

Significantly, perversion had already made a cameo, appearance in *How to Do things with words* in a passage where the philosophical. And theatrical meanings of performative actually do establish contact with each other. 'After provisionally distinguishing his first lecture constatives from performatives – statements that merely describe some state of affairs from utterances that accomplish, in their very enunciation, an action that generates effects—Austin proceeded to isolate a special property of the latter: that if something goes wrong in the performance of a performative the utterance is then, we may say, not indeed false but in general unhappy". Such "infelicity," Austin extrapolated, "is an ill to which all acts are heir which have the general character of ritual or ceremonial, ail conventional acts" (18–19). But if illness was understood here as intrinsic to, and thus constitutive of the structure of a performative – a performative utterance is one, as it were, that always may get sick – elsewhere Austin imposed a kind of quarantine his decision to, focus exclusively, in his "more general account" of speech acts, on those that are "issued in ordinary circumstances

[A] performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance—a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways — intelligibly – used not seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use"—ways

which fall under the doctrine of the etiologies of language. All this we are excluding from consideration. (22)

This passage, of course, forms the heart of Derrida's reading of Austin in "Signature Event Context: where Austin sought to purge from his analysis. of "ordinary circumstances a range of predicates he associated narrowly with theater, Derrida argued that these, very predicates condition from the start the possibility of any and all performatives. "For, finally," asked Derrida, "is not what Austin excludes as anomalous, exceptional, 'nonserious', that is, citation (on the stage, in a poem, or in a soliloquy), the determined modification of a general citationality—or rather, a general iterability—without which there would not even be a 'successful' performative?" (Margins, 325). Where Austin, then, seemed intent on separating the actor's citational practices from ordinary speech–act performances, Derrida regarded both as structured by a generalized iterability, a pervasive theatricality common to, stage and world alike.