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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. The English Institute conference at which these essays were presented was an attempt, at a moment full of possibilities, to take stock of the uses, implications, reimagined histories, and new affordances of the performativities that are emerging from this conjunction.

That these issues reverberated through what has been, historically, a conference on English literature is only one of the many signs of theoretical convergence that has, of late, pushed performativity onto center stage. A term whose specifically Austinian valences have been renewed

INTRODUCTION

PERFORMATIVITY

AND

PERFORMANCE

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.¹ 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.² 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. . . .³

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.⁵ 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 seems to be characterized by the *dislinkage* precisely of cause and effect between the signifier and the world.⁶ At the same time, it’s 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.⁷ After provisionally distinguishing in 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*” (14). Such “infelicity,” Austin extrapolated, “is an ill to which *all* acts are heir which have the general character of ritual or ceremonial, all *conventional* acts” (18–19). But if illness was understood here as intrinsic to and thus constitutive of the structure of performatives—a performative utterance is one, as it were, that always may get sick—elsewhere Austin imposed a kind of quarantine in 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 *etiolations* 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.

Much, of course, has long since been made of Austin’s parasite, which has gone on to enjoy a distinguished career in literary theory and criticism. And Derrida’s notion of a generalized iterability has played a significant role in the emergence of the newly expanded performance studies. Yet what, to our knowledge, has been underappreciated (even, apparently, by Derrida) is the nature of the perversion which, for Austin, needs to be expelled as it threatens to blur the difference between theater and world. After all these years, in other words, we finally looked up “etiolation” and its cognates in our handy Merriam-Webster, and were surprised to discover the following range of definitions:

etiolate (vt): 1) to bleach and alter or weaken the natural development of (a green plant) by excluding sunlight; 2) to make pale and sickly <remembering how drink hardens the skin and how drugs etiolate it—Jean Stafford>; 3) to rob of natural vigor, to prevent or inhibit the full physical, emotional, or mental growth of (as by sheltering or pampering) <the shade of Poets’ walk, a green tunnel that has etiolated so many . . . poets—Cyril Connolly>

etiolated (adj): 1) grown in absence of sunlight, blanched; lacking in vigor or natural exuberance, lacking in strength of feeling or appetites, effete <etiolated poetry>

etiolation (n): 1) the act, process or result of growing a plant in darkness; 2) the loss or lessening of natural vigor, overrefinement of thought or emotional sensibilities: decadence

etiology (n): a science or doctrine of causation or of the demonstration of causes; 2) all the factors that contribute to the occurrence of a disease or abnormal condition

What’s so surprising, in a thinker otherwise strongly resistant to moralism, is to discover the pervasiveness with which the excluded theatrical is hereby linked with the perverted, the artificial, the unnatural, the abnormal, the decadent, the effete, the diseased. We seem, with Austinian “etiolation,” to be transported not just to the horticultural laboratory, but back to a very different scene: the Gay 1890s of Oscar Wilde. Striking that, even for the dandyish Austin, theatricality would be inseparable from a normatively homophobic thematics of the “peculiar,” “anomalous, exceptional, ‘nonserious.’”

If the performative has thus been from its inception already infected with queerness, the situation has hardly changed substantially today. The question of when and how is saying something doing something echoed, to take one frighteningly apt example, throughout C-SPAN’s coverage of the debates surrounding the Pentagon’s 1993 “don’t ask, don’t tell, don’t pursue” policy on lesbians and gay men in the U.S. military. The premise of the new policy is:

Sexual orientation will not be a bar to service unless manifested by homosexual conduct. The military will discharge members who engage in homosexual conduct, defined as a homosexual act, a statement that the member is homosexual or bisexual, or a marriage or attempted marriage to someone of the same gender.³

“Act,” “conduct,” and “statement” pursue their coercively incoherent dance on the ground of identity, of “orientation.” Since the unveiling of the policy, all branches of government have been constrained to philosophize endlessly about what kind of *statement* can constitute “homosexual *conduct*,” as opposed to orientation, and hence trigger an investigation aimed at punishment or separation. Performativity—as any reader of Austin will recognize—lives in the examples. Here is an example of a U.S. Congressman imitating J. L. Austin:

Representative Ike Skelton, a Missouri Democrat who heads the House [Armed Services Military Forces and Personnel] subcommittee, asked [the Joint Chiefs of Staff] for reactions to four situations: a private says he is gay; a private says he thinks he is gay; an entire unit announces at 6:30 A.M. muster that they are all gay; a private frequents a gay [bar] every Friday night, reads gay magazines and marches in gay parades. He asked what would happen in each situation under the new policy.⁹

Such highly detailed interrogations of the relation of *speech* to *act* are occurring in the space of a relatively recent interrogation of the relation of *act* to *identity*. “Sexual orientation will not be a bar to service unless manifested by homosexual conduct”—contrast these fine discriminations with the flat formulation that alone defined the issue until 1993: “Homosexuality is incompatible with military service.” In response to many different interests, the monolith of “homosexuality” has diffracted into several different elements that evoke competing claims for legitimation or censure. Unlikely as the influence may seem, the new policy is clearly founded in a debased popularization of Foucauldian and post-Foucauldian work in the history of sexuality. Probably through the work of legal scholars involved in gay/lesbian advocacy, the queer theorists’ central distinction between same-sex sexual *acts* and historically contingent gay/lesbian *identities* has suddenly become a staple of public discourse from Presidential announcements to the call-in shows (assuming it’s possible at this point to distinguish between the two). Yet the popularization of this analytic tool has occurred through an assimilation of it to such highly phobic formulations as the Christian one, “Hate the sin but love the sinner.” (Was it for this that the careful scholarship of the past decade has traced out the living and dialectical linkages and gaps between same-sex acts and queer and queer-loving identities?—all of which need to be nurtured and affirmed if any are to flourish.)

A variety of critiques of agency, as well, have begun to put interpretive pressure on the relations between the individual and the group as those are embodied, negotiated, or even ruptured by potent acts of speech or silence. Viewed through the lenses of a postmodern deconstruction of agency, Austin can be seen to have tacitly performed two radical

condensations: of the complex producing and underwriting relations on the “hither” side of the utterance, and of the no-less-constitutive negotiations that comprise its uptake. Bringing these sites under the scrutiny of the performative hypothesis, Austin makes it possible to see how much more unpacking is necessary than he himself has performed. To begin with, Austin tends to treat the speaker as if s/he were all but coextensive—at least, continuous—with the power by which the individual speech act is initiated and authorized and may be enforced. (In the most extreme example, he seems to suggest that war is what happens when individual citizens declare war! [40, 156].) “Actions can only be performed by persons,” he writes, “and obviously in our cases [of explicit performatives] the utterer must be the performer” (60). Foucauldian, Marxist, deconstructive, psychoanalytic, and other recent theoretical projects have battered at the self-evidence of that “obviously”—though in post-Foucauldian theory, in particular, it seems clear that the leverage for such a critique is available precisely in the space opened up by the Austinian interest in provisionally distinguishing what is being said from the fact of the saying of it.¹⁰

If Austin’s work finds new ways to make a deconstruction of *the performer* both necessary and possible, it is even more suggestive about the “thither” side of the speech-act, the complex process (or, with a more postmodernist inflection, the complex space) of uptake. Austin’s rather bland invocation of “the proper context” (in which a person’s saying something is to count as doing something) has opened, under pressure of recent theory, onto a populous and contested scene in which the role of silent or implied witnesses, for example, or the quality and structuration of the bonds that unite auditors or link them to speakers, bears as much explanatory weight as do the particular speech acts of supposed individual speech agents. Differing crucially (as, say, theater differs from film?) from a more familiar, psychoanalytically founded interrogation of *the gaze*, this interrogation of the space of reception involves more contradictions and discontinuities than any available account of interpellation can so far do justice to; but interpellation may be among the most useful terms for beginning such an analysis. (In the Congressional hearings on “don’t ask, don’t tell,” a

lively question was this: if a drill sergeant motivates a bunch of recruits by yelling “Faggots!” at them, is it permissible for a recruit to raise his hand and respond, “Yes, sir”?) It is in this theoretical surround that the link between performativity and performance in the theatrical sense has become, at last, something more than a pun or an unexamined axiom: it emerges, as in many of the essays collected here, as an active question.

The most classic Austinian examples (those unceasing invocations of the first person singular present indicative active) open up newly to such approaches. “I dare you,” for instance, gets classified cursorily, along with “defy,” “protest,” “challenge,” in Austin’s baggy category of the behabitives, which “include the notion of reaction to other people’s behavior and fortunes and of attitudes and expressions of attitudes to someone else’s past conduct or imminent conduct” (160–161). But to do justice to the performative force of “I dare you,” as opposed to its arguably *constative* function of expressing “attitudes,” requires a disimpaction of the scene, as well as the act, of utterance. To begin with, while “I dare you” ostensibly involves only a singular first and a singular second person, it effectually depends as well on the tacit requisition of a third person plural, a “they” of witness—whether or not literally present. In daring you to perform some foolhardy act (or else expose yourself as, shall we say, a wuss), “I” (hypothetically singular) necessarily invoke a consensus of the eyes of others. It is these eyes through which you risk being seen as a wuss; by the same token, it is *as* people who share with me a contempt for wussiness that these others are interpellated, with or without their consent, by the act I have performed in daring you.

Now, these people, supposing them real and present, may or may not in fact have any interest in sanctioning against wussiness. They might, indeed, themselves be wussy and proud of it. They may wish actively to oppose a social order based on contempt for wussitude. They may simply, for one reason or another, not identify with my contempt for wusses. Alternatively they may be skeptical of my own standing in the ongoing war on wussiness—they may be unwilling to leave the work of its arbitration to me; may wonder if I harbor

wussish tendencies myself, perhaps revealed in my unresting need to test the w-quotient of others. For that matter, you yourself, the person dared, may share with them any of these skeptical attitudes on the subject; and may additionally doubt, or be uninterested in, *their* authority to classify you as wuss or better.

Thus, “I dare you” invokes the presumption, but *only* the presumption, of a consensus between speaker and witnesses, and to some extent between all of them and the addressee. The presumption is embodied in the lack of a formulaic negative response to being dared, or to being interpellated as witness to a dare. The fascinating and powerful class of negative performatives—disavowal, renunciation, repudiation, “count me out”—is marked, in almost every instance, by the asymmetrical property of being much less prone to becoming conventional than the positive performatives. Negative performatives tend to have a high threshold. (Thus Dante speaks of refusal—even refusal through cowardice—as something “great.”)¹¹ It requires little presence of mind to find the comfortable formula “I dare you,” but a good deal more for the dragooned witness to disinterpellate with, “Don’t do it on my account.”

Nonetheless such feats are possible, are made possible by the utterance itself; and to that extent it is necessary to understand any instance of “I dare you” as constituting a crisis quite as much as it constitutes a discrete act. For in daring you, in undertaking through any given iteration to reinscribe a set of presumptive valuations more deeply, and thereby to establish more firmly my own authority to wield them, I place under stress the consensual nature both of those valuations and of my own authority. To have my dare greeted with a witnesses’ chorus of “Don’t do it on our account” would radically alter the social, the political, the interlocutory (I-you-they) space of our encounter. So, in a different way, would your calmly accomplishing the dare and coming back to me, before the same witnesses, with the expectation of my accomplishing it in turn.

Or let us join Austin in reverting to his first and most influential, arguably the founding, example of the explicit performative: “‘I do (sc. take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)’—as uttered in

the course of the marriage ceremony” (5). As one of us has recently written, in a discussion of specifically *queer* performativity:

Austin keeps going back to that formula “first person singular present indicative active” . . . and the marriage example makes me wonder about the apparently natural way the first-person speaking, acting, and pointing subject gets constituted in marriage through a confident appeal to state authority, through the calm interpellation of others present as “witnesses,” and through the logic of the (heterosexual) supplement whereby individual subjective agency is guaranteed by the welding into a cross-gender dyad. The subject of “I do” is an “I” only insofar as he or she assents in becoming part of a sanctioned, cross-gender “we” so constituted in the presence of a “they”; and the I “does,” or has agency in the matter, only by ritually mystifying its overidentification with the powers (for which no pronoun obtains) of state and church.

The marriage example, self-evidently, will strike a queer reader at some more oblique angle or angles. Persons who self-identify as queer will be those whose subjectivity is lodged in refusals or deflections of (or by) the logic of the heterosexual supplement; in far less simple associations attaching to state authority; in far less complacent relation to the witness of others. The emergence of the first person, of the singular, of the active, and of the indicative are all questions rather than presumptions, for queer performativity.¹²

Austin-like, the obliquity of queer reception needs and struggles to explicitate the relations on the thither side of “I do.” Any queer who’s struggled to articulate to friends or family why we love them, but just *don’t want to be at their wedding*, knows it from the inside, the dynamic of compulsory witness that the marriage ceremony invokes. Compulsory witness not just in the sense that you aren’t allowed to absent yourself, but in the way that a much fuller meaning of “witness” (a fuller one than Austin ever treats) gets activated in this prototypical performative. It is the constitution of a community of witness that makes the marriage; the silence of witness (we don’t speak now, we forever hold our peace) that permits it; the bare, negative, potent but undiscretionary speech act of our physical presence—maybe even *especially* the presence of those people whom the institution of

marriage defines itself by excluding—that ratifies and recruits the legitimacy of its privilege.

And to attend, as we have been here, to the role of witness in constituting the space of the speech-act: where does that get us but to the topic of marriage itself *as* theater—marriage as a kind of fourth wall or invisible proscenium arch that moves through the world (a heterosexual couple secure in their right to hold hands in the street), continually reorienting around itself the surrounding relations of visibility and spectatorship, of the tacit and the explicit, of the possibility or impossibility of a given person’s articulating a given enunciatory position? Marriage isn’t always hell, but it is true that *le mariage, c’est les autres*: like a play, marriage exists in and for the eyes of others. One of the most ineradicable folk-beliefs of the married seems to be that it is no matter-of-fact thing, but rather a great privilege, for anyone else to behold a wedding or a married couple or to be privy to their secrets—including oppressive or abusive secrets, but also the showy open secret of the “happy marriage.” Like the most conventional definition of a play, marriage is constituted as a spectacle that denies its audience the ability either to look away from it or equally to intervene in it.

And the epistemology of marital relation continues to be profoundly warped by the force field of the marital proscenium. Acquiring worldly wisdom consists in, among other things, building up a usable repertoire of apothegms along the lines of: don’t expect to be forgiven *ever* if you say to your friend X, “I’m glad you two have broken up; I never liked the way Y treated you anyway” and your friend and Y then get back together, however briefly. But also: don’t expect to know what’s happening or going to happen between X and Y on the basis of what your friend tells you is going on, or even on the basis of lovey-dovey or scari-fying scenes which may be getting staged in one way or another “for your benefit.” (Not, of course, that any actual benefit accrues to you from them.)

Think of all the Victorian novels whose sexual plot climaxes, not in the moment of adultery, but in the moment when the proscenium arch of the marriage is, however excruciatingly, displaced: when the fact of a marriage’s unhappiness ceases to be a pseudosecret or an open

secret, and becomes a bond of mutuality with someone outside the marriage; when a woman says or intimates something about “her marriage” to a friend or lover that she would not say to her husband. These tend to be the most wracking and epistemologically the “biggest” moments of the marriage novel. Such a text, then, also constitutes an exploration of the possible grounds and performative potential of refusals, fractures, warpings of the proscenium of marital witness.

The entire plot of *The Golden Bowl*, for instance, is structured by an extraordinary aria uttered by Charlotte Stant to Prince Amerigo, her ex-lover, when she has persuaded him to spend an afternoon alone with her on the eve of his marriage to another woman:

“I don’t care what you make of it, and I don’t ask anything whatever of you—anything but this. I want to have said it—that’s all; I want not to have failed to say it. To see you once and be with you, to be as we are now and as we used to be, for one small hour—or say for two—that’s what I have had for weeks in my head. I mean, of course, to get it *before*—before what you’re going to do. . . . This is what I’ve got. This is what I shall always have. This is what I should have missed, of course,” she pursued, “if you had chosen to make me miss it. . . . I had to take the risk. Well, you’re all I could have hoped. That’s what I was to have said. I didn’t want simply to get my time with you, but I wanted you to know. I wanted you”—she kept it up, slowly, softly, with a small tremor of voice, but without the least failure of sense or sequence—“I wanted you to understand. I wanted you, that is, to hear. I don’t care, I think, whether you understand or not. If I ask nothing of you I don’t—I mayn’t—ask even so much as that. What you may think of me—that doesn’t in the least matter. What I want is that it shall always be with you—so that you’ll never be able quite to get rid of it—that I *did*. I won’t say that you *did*—you may make as little of that as you like. But that I was here with you where we are and we are—I just saying this. . . . That’s all.”¹³

The ostentatious circularity of Charlotte’s performative utterance (“I want to have said it—that’s all; I want not to have failed to say it. . . . that I was here with you where we are and *as* we are—I just saying this”) puts it in a complicated relation to the performative utterance of the marriage vow. Charlotte here forestalls and displaces the Prince’s

marriage vow, but without at all preventing it. Her performative is so repetitious and insistent because she can’t just fill in the blanks of some preexisting performative convention, but rather must move elaborately athwart it, in creating a nonce one. She parodies certain features of the marriage vow—in particular the slippery inexplicitness with which, in each case, an act of utterance makes the claim both to represent and to subsume a narrative of unspecified sexual acts. (“I *did* [it]. . . . I won’t say that *you* did [it].”) She also makes the most of a certain pathos (“I don’t ask anything whatever of you”) in her distance from the presumptuous logic of the heterosexual supplement: the agency of her “I” exactly *isn’t* to be guaranteed by another echoing “I do” that will constitute it retroactively within a stable “we.” But this insisted-upon isolation of the unguaranteed “I” also entails a barely implicit threat of sexual blackmail (“I *won’t* say [right now] that you did [it]”). Furthermore, Charlotte places herself firmly in a Gothic tradition (think of *The Monk* or *Frankenstein* or *Daniel Deronda*) where variants on the marriage vow function as maledictions or curses, moving diagonally through time, not preventing marriage but poisoning it, prospectively, retroactively, through some unexpected adhesion of literalness to the supposed-to-be-mobile performative signifier. With this speech, Charlotte Stant has done what she *can* do—and it’s a lot—to install her own “I” as a kind of permanent shunt across the marriage proscenium, mining the threshold of who can or must or can’t or mayn’t regard the drama of whose life; which “I”s are or are not to be constituted as and by the “we” that means and doesn’t mean the power of the state.¹⁴

Arguably, it’s the aptitude of the explicit performative for mobilizing and epitomizing such transformative effects on interlocutory space that makes it almost irresistible—in the face of a lot of discouragement from Austin himself—to associate it with theatrical performance. And to associate it, by the same token, with political activism, or with ritual.¹⁵ But that association also seems to throw off center a conventional definition of theater. In particular, it challenges any definition of theater according to which the relation between theatrical speakers and the words they speak would have to be seen as fixed in advance, as definitionally consistent. Not—to say the

obvious—that every instance (or even many instances) of theatrical performance can allow actors the discretionary choice that “real people” are supposed to have over what words may issue from our mouths. But if a spatialized, postmodernist performative analysis like the present one can demonstrate any one thing, surely it is how contingent and radically *heterogeneous*, as well as how contestable, must be the relations between any subject and any utterance.

The essays in this volume demonstrate the extraordinary productivity of this new refusal to take any aspect of performative relations as definitionally settled. The essays approach the conjunction of performance with performativity from different beginning points. Three of them work explicitly within Austin’s legacy. Timothy Gould’s “The Unhappy Performative” is the most sustained as a reading of Austin, finding a myriad of ways of pushing back against what have been the premature foreclosings of Austinian questions in deconstructive literary criticism and in speech-act philosophy. Suggesting that the theatrical is more closely associated with Austin’s description of the constative function of language rather than (as most readers have assumed) with its performative function, Gould mobilizes a reading of *Antigone* to dramatize the promise of opening up conceptual space between Austin’s categories of illocution and perlocution. In “Burning Acts,” Judith Butler suggests a reorientation of a key Austinian question, “asking . . . what it might mean for a word ‘to do’ a thing, where the doing is less instrumental than it is transitive.” Taking as her central example a racist cross burning as considered by the U.S. Supreme Court, Butler exposes the consequences of various legal models’ blindness to the performative dimensions of what the Court has chosen to frame as a merely constative conveyance of ideas. “Epidemiology as performative,” in comparison with the constatation of a tradition of tropical medicine, is the subject of Cindy Patton’s “Performativity and Spatial Distinction: The End of AIDS Epidemiology.” In discussing both AIDS medicine and AIDS activism, Patton identifies and offers tools for undoing a history of “overemphasis on the actant/subject and . . . relative lack of consideration of the stage of context or field of the performance or performative act.”

Indeed, part of the unfulfilled promise of a focus on performativity is that it might permit more nuanced understandings of the relations between what have been blandly, confidently distinguished as “text” and “context.” In different ways, the essays by Sandra L. Richards and Joseph Roach illuminate the structuring effects of what Austin calls “uptake” in the performances they consider. In “Writing the Absent Potential: Drama, Performance, and the Canon of African-American Literature,” Richards discusses the surprising problem that performance genres have posed for the academic framing of African-American literature; her discussion of the performance history of *Color Struck* and *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* links the consequent devaluation of performance itself to the devaluation within this literature of women’s viewpoints and voices. Roach, too, contributes to the redefinition and reanimation of the space of performance in “Culture and Performance in the Circum-Atlantic World,” where he braids together themes of embodiment, surrogation, and collective memory in Afro-Euro-American history to culminate in a bravura reading of a New Orleans jazz funeral.

A millennia-old way of posing the question of embodiment and surrogation is the Aristotelian notion of catharsis, which in the essays of Andrew Ford, Stephen Orgel, and Elin Diamond opens onto a remarkably Austinian-sounding series of meditations on how saying something, at particular critical moments in the West, has been signally a way of doing something. In “*Katharsis: The Ancient Problem*,” Andrew Ford concludes his reading of the *Poetics* and related texts by Aristotle by suggesting that the purpose of Aristotle’s appeal to catharsis was “to delimit the field of the theorist,” thereby making possible a theatrical formalism that would constitute something called literature as purged of the “irrationality” of its performance. Stephen Orgel brings catharsis up to the Renaissance in “The Play of Conscience,” which puts into question, through a reading of Massinger’s play *The Roman Actor*, who is to be purged by drama, of what they are to be purged, and what purgation itself was thought to be, in the double historical context of Renaissance classicism. Elin Diamond’s essay, “The Shudder of Catharsis in Twentieth-Century Performance,” takes as its texts a series of women’s performances, from Eleanora Duse to Karen

Finley, that are also performances of femininity. Diamond makes graphic why the problematic of catharsis lives on in contemporary performance, given the connections it articulates and continually dislocates between seeing and feeling, between word and body.

Other sets of dislocations—between vision and knowledge, fantasy and reality, space and time, wakefulness and death—form the subject of Cathy Caruth's essay, "Traumatic Awakenings," which reconsiders Freud's and Lacan's now-classic analyses of "The Dream of the Burning Child." Describing traumatic experience as a performance "that contains within itself its own difference," Caruth suggests that trauma undermines the classical dramaturgy that an Oedipalizing dream theory has long since sought to uphold; reconceived here as inaugurating an ethical relation to the real, trauma imposes itself, Caruth concludes, as a persistent, irreducible problem for psychoanalytic thinking—forming, in so doing, its opening to the future.

The force of these essays, taken together, is, we believe, to transform the interdisciplinary performativity/performance conversation in powerfully new and usefully unpredictable ways. The essays all begin at a point far beyond the pre-Derridean project of definitively segregating constataion from performativity, and theatrical speech from "ordinary language." Vastly more important is the confident way that they move beyond recent work—itsself highly significant—whose generally tacit assumption has been that the most interesting questions to bring to performativity/performance are epistemological ones. In contrast, these essays strikingly refrain from looking to performativity/performance for a demonstration of whether or not there are essential truths or identities, and how we could, or why we couldn't, know them. As a certain stress has been lifted momentarily from the issues that surround *being something*, an excitingly charged and spacious stage seems to open up for explorations of that even older, even newer question, of how saying something can be doing something.

NOTES

1. Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1982); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990), and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, 1993).
2. An exemplary instance of this acknowledgment would be Shoshan Felman, *The Literary Speech Act*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, 1983), which undertakes both a speech-act reading of *Don Juan* and a theatrical reading of Austin.
3. Among the many texts that reflect this transformation, see Sue-Ellen Case, ed., *Performing Feminisms* (Baltimore, 1990); Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia, 1985); Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity* (New York, 1993); and Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (Baltimore, 1985). See the Bibliography in this volume for a fuller listing of important works on performance and performativity. On the ontological distinctions that circumscribe traditional notions of theatrical space, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Theatrum Analyticum," *Clyph 2* (1977), pp. 122–143, and Geoffrey Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (New York, 1988): "A theatre involves three limits or divisions or closures. First, the outside walls of the building itself. The 'real world' is outside, the theatre inside. . . . Within the theatre comes a second limit or division, separating the stage from the audience, marking off the place observed and the place from which it is observed. . . . A third essential limit separates the stage from the wings or back-stage" (pp. 10–11).
4. For an extension of this discussion, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*," *GLQ* 1 (1993), p. 2, from which the remainder of this paragraph is taken.
5. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley, 1980).
6. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1984); J. Hillis Miller, *Tropes, Parables, Performatives: Essays on Twentieth-Century Literature* (Durham, 1991); Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, 1979).
7. J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA, 1975).
8. "Text of Pentagon's New Policy Guidelines on Homosexuals in the Military," *New York Times* (July 20, 1993), p. A16 (national edition), emphasis added.
9. Eric Schmitt, "New Gay Policy Emerges as a Cousin of Status Quo," *New York Times* (July 22, 1993), p. A14 (national edition).
10. Foucault writes, for instance, about sexuality:

The central issue . . . is not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex, whether one formulates prohibitions or permissions, whether

one asserts its importance or denies its effects . . . ; but to account for the fact that it is spoken about. . . . What is at issue, briefly, is the overall “discursive fact.”

(*The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, tr. Robert Hurley [New York, 1978]).

The Foucauldian move is not, of course, identical to Austin’s distinction between the (true or false) constatement of an utterance, and its performative force—a deemphasis of yes versus no—is not the same as a deemphasis of true versus false. The two moves are congruently structured, however; they invoke and reward very similar interpretive skills. We might say that both Austin and Foucault train readers to identify and perform the kind of figure/ground reversals analyzed by the Gestalt psychology of the first half of this century. Austin for instance, abandoning the attempt to distinguish between some utterances that are intrinsically performative and others that are intrinsically constative, finally offers a substitute account, applicable to any utterance, that is couched in terms (such as the curious intransitive verb “to abstract”) of perception and attention: “With the constative utterance, we abstract from the illocutionary . . . aspects of the speech act, and we concentrate on the locutionary. . . . With the performative utterance, we attend as much as possible to the illocutionary force of the utterance, and abstract from the dimension of correspondence with facts” (pp. 145–146).

11. “*Il gran rifiuto*,” in the *Inferno*, III, 60. See also Cavafy’s poem, “Che fece . . . il gran rifiuto,” in Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, trs., George Savidis, ed., *C.P. Cavafy: Collected Poems*, revised ed. (Princeton, 1992), p. 12.
12. “Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*,” pp. 3–4.
13. Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1980), pp. 93–94.
14. Since writing the above paragraphs, I have been doing more work on the same issues and passages, arriving at a further and somewhat different formulation. In a forthcoming essay, “Around the Performative,” I’ll suggest that it would be useful to understand language like Charlotte Stant’s, not under the rubric of the performative proper, but under a new rubric, that of *the periperformative*. Periperformatives are utterances, not themselves proper performatives, that explicitly allude to explicitly performative utterances. The force of this concept, as I’ll hope to show, involves its ability to spatialize a neighborhood of language around or touching the performative (as opposed to the emphasis on temporality in post-Derridean discussions of the performative); thus, the spatial emphasis that underlies the present discussion of performativity and performance will, as I hope, be more explicitly grounded and further developed.—EKS
15. Judith Butler, for example, discusses “the convergence of theatrical work with theatrical activism” in *Bodies that Matter*, p. 233.