

faces in the crowd *as* petals on a bough—is an instance of the poetic imagination ‘seeing the world anew’, grasping unexpected relationships and, perhaps, appreciating what to other observers would be trivial or oppressive, finding profundity in formal appearance. This little poem thus can become a reflection on the power of poetic imagination to achieve the effects that the poem itself achieves. An example like this illustrates a basic convention of poetic interpretation: consider what this poem and its procedures say about poetry or the creation of meaning. Poems, in their deployment of rhetorical operations, may be read as explorations in poetics, just as novels, as we shall see next, are at some level reflections on the making intelligible of our experience of time and thus explorations in narrative theory.

6 Narrative

Once upon a time, *literature* meant above all poetry. The novel was a modern upstart, too close to biography or chronicle to be genuinely literary, a popular form that could not aspire to the high callings of lyric and epic poetry. But in the twentieth century the novel has eclipsed poetry, both as what writers write and what readers read and, since the 1960s, narrative has come to dominate literary education as well. People still study poetry—often, it is required—but novels and short stories have become the core of the curriculum.

This is not just a result of the preferences of a mass readership, who happily pick up stories but seldom read poems. Literary and cultural theory have increasingly claimed cultural centrality for narrative. Stories, the argument goes, are the main way we make sense of things, whether in thinking of our lives as a progression leading somewhere or in telling ourselves what is happening in the world. Scientific explanation makes sense of things by placing them under laws—whenever *a* and *b* obtains, *c* will occur—but life is generally not like that. It follows not a scientific logic of cause and effect but the logic of story,

where to understand is to conceive of how one thing leads to another, how something might have come about: how Maggie ended up selling software in Singapore, how George's father came to give him a car.

We make sense of events through possible stories; philosophers of history, I mentioned in Chapter 2, have even argued that the historical explanation follows not the logic of scientific causality but the logic of story: to understand the French Revolution is to grasp a narrative showing how one event led to another. Narrative structures are pervasive: Frank Kermode notes that when we say a ticking clock goes 'tick-tock', we give the noise a fictional structure, differentiating between two physically identical sounds, to make *tick* a beginning and *tock* an end. 'The clock's *tick-tock* I take to be a model of what we call a plot, an organization that humanizes time by giving it form.'

The theory of narrative ('narratology') has been an active branch of literary theory, and literary study relies on theories of narrative structure: on notions of plot, of different kinds of narrators, of narrative techniques. The poetics of narrative, as we might call it, both attempts to understand the components of narrative and analyses how particular narratives achieve their effects.

But narrative is not just an academic subject. There is a basic human drive to hear and tell stories. Children very early develop what one might call a basic narrative competence: demanding stories, they know when you are trying to cheat by stopping before reaching the end. So the first question for the theory of narrative might be, what do we implicitly know about the basic shape of stories that enables us to distinguish between a story that ends 'properly' and one that doesn't, where things are left hanging? The theory of narrative might, then, be conceived as an attempt to spell out, to make explicit, this narrative competence, just as linguistics is an attempt to make explicit linguistic

competence: what speakers of a language unconsciously know in knowing a language. Theory here can be conceived as a setting forth of an intuitive cultural knowledge or understanding.

What are the elemental requirements of a story? Aristotle says that plot is the most basic feature of narrative, that good stories must have a beginning, middle, and end, and that they give pleasure because of the rhythm of their ordering. But what creates the impression that a particular series of events has this shape? Theorists have proposed various accounts. Essentially, though, a plot requires a transformation. There must be an initial situation, a change involving some sort of reversal, and a resolution that marks the change as significant. Some theories emphasize types of parallelism that produce satisfactory plots, such as the move from one relationship between characters to its opposite, or from a fear or prediction to its realization or its inversion; from a problem to its solution, or from a false accusation or misrepresentation to its rectification. In each case we find the association of a development on the level of events with a transformation on the level of theme. A mere sequence of events does not make a story. There must be an end relating back to the beginning—according to some theorists, an end that indicates what has happened to the desire that led to the events the story narrates.

If narrative theory is an account of narrative competence, it must focus also on readers' ability to identify plots. Readers can tell that two works are versions of the same story; they can summarize plots and discuss the adequacy of a plot summary. It's not that they will always agree, but disagreements are likely to reveal considerable shared understanding. The theory of narrative postulates the existence of a level of structure—what we generally call 'plot'—independent of any particular language or representational medium. Unlike poetry, which gets lost in translation, plot can be preserved

in translation from one language or one medium into another: a silent film or a comic strip can have the same plot as a short story.

We discover, though, that there are two ways of thinking about plot. From one angle, plot is a way of shaping events to make them into a genuine story: writers and readers shape events into a plot in their attempts to make sense of things. From another angle, plot is what gets shaped by narratives, as they present the same 'story' in different ways. So a sequence of acts by three characters can be shaped (by writers and readers) into the elementary plot of heterosexual love, where a young man seeks to wed a young woman, their desire is resisted by paternal opposition, but some twist of events allows the young lovers to come together. This plot with three characters can be presented in narrative from the point of view of the suffering heroine, or the angry father, or the young man, or an external observer puzzled by these events, or an omniscient narrator who can describe each character's innermost feelings or who takes a knowing distance from these goings-on. From this angle, the plot or story is the given and the discourse is the varied presentations of it.

The three levels I have been discussing—events, plot (or story), and discourse—function as two oppositions: between events and plot, and between story and discourse.

events/plot
story/discourse

Plot or story is the material that is presented, ordered from a certain point of view by discourse (different versions of 'the same story'). But plot itself is already a shaping of events. A plot can make a wedding the happy ending of the story or the beginning of a story—or can make it a turn in the middle. What readers actually encounter, though, is the discourse of

a text: the plot is something readers *infer* from the text, and the idea of elementary events out of which this plot was formed is also an inference or construction of the reader. If we talk about events that have been shaped into a plot, it is to highlight the meaningfulness and organization of the plot.

The basic distinction of the theory of narrative, then, is between plot and presentation, story and discourse. (The terminology varies from one theorist to another.) Confronted with a text (a term that includes films and other representations), the reader makes sense of it by identifying the story and then seeing the text as one particular presentation of that story; by identifying 'what happens', we are able to think of the rest of the verbal material as the way of portraying what takes place. Then we can ask what type of presentation has been chosen and what difference that makes. There are many variables, and they are crucial to narratives' effects. Much narrative theory explores different ways of conceiving these variables. Here are some key questions that identify meaningful variation.

Who speaks? By convention every narrative is said to have a narrator, who may stand outside the story or be a character within it. Theorists distinguish 'first person narration', where a narrator says 'I', from what is somewhat confusingly called 'third person narration', where there is no 'I'—the narrator is not identified as a character in the story and all the characters are referred to in the third person, by name or as 'he' or 'she'. First person narrators may be the main *protagonists* of the story they tell; they may be *participants*, minor characters in the story; or they may be *observers* of the story, whose function is not to act but to describe things to us. First person observers may be fully developed as individuals with a name, history, and personality, or they may not be developed at all and quickly drop from sight as the

narration gets under way, effacing themselves after introducing the story.

Who speaks to whom? The author creates a text which is read by readers. Readers infer from the text a narrator, a voice which speaks. The narrator addresses listeners who are sometimes implied or constructed, sometimes explicitly identified (especially in stories within stories, where one character becomes the narrator and tells the inner story to other characters). The narrator's audience is often called the *narratee*. Whether or not narratees are explicitly identified, the narrative implicitly constructs an audience by what its narration takes for granted and what it explains. A work from another time and place usually implies an audience that recognizes certain references and shares certain assumptions that a modern reader may not share. Feminist criticism has been especially interested in the way that European and American narratives frequently posit a male reader: the reader is implicitly addressed as one who shares a masculine view.

Who speaks when? Narration may be situated at the time at which events occur (as in Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*, where narration takes the form, 'now x is happening, now y is happening, now z is happening'). Telling may immediately follow particular events, as in epistolary novels (novels in the form of letters), such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, where each letter deals with what had happened up to that point. Or, as is most common, narration may occur after the final events in the narrative, as the narrator looks back on the entire sequence.

Who speaks what language? Narrative voices may have their own distinctive language, in which they recount everything in the story, or they may adopt and report the language of others. A narrative that sees things through the consciousness of a child may either use adult language to report the child's perceptions or slip into a child's language. The

Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin describes the novel as fundamentally polyphonic (multi-voiced) or dialogic rather than monological (single-voiced): the essence of the novel is its staging of different voices or discourses and, thus, of the clash of social perspectives and points of view.

Who speaks with what authority? To tell a story is to claim a certain authority, which listeners grant. When the narrator of Jane Austen's *Emma* begins, 'Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, . . .' we don't sceptically wonder whether she really was handsome and clever. We accept this statement until we are given reason to think otherwise. Narrators are sometimes termed *unreliable* when they provide enough information about situations and clues about their own biases to make us doubt their interpretations of events, or when we find reasons to doubt that the narrator shares the same values as the author. Theorists speak of *self-conscious narration* when narrators discuss the fact that they are telling a story, hesitate about how to tell it, or even flaunt the fact that they can determine how the story will turn out. Self-conscious narration highlights the problem of narrative authority.

Who sees? Discussions of narrative frequently speak of the 'point of view from which a story is told', but this use of *point of view* confuses two separate questions: who speaks? and whose vision is presented? Henry James's novel *What Maisie Knew* employs a narrator who is not a child but it presents the story through the consciousness of the child Maisie. Maisie is not the narrator; she is described in the third person, as 'she', but the novel presents many things from her perspective. Maisie, for example, does not fully understand the sexual dimension of relations between the adults around her. The story is, to use a term developed by the theorists of narrative Mieke Bal and Gérard Genette, *focalized* through her. Hers is the consciousness or position through which

events are brought into focus. The question 'who speaks?', then, is separate from the question of 'who sees?' From whose perspective are the events brought into focus and presented? The focalizer may or may not be the same as the narrator. There are numerous variables here.

1. Temporal. Narration may focalize events from the time at which they occurred, from shortly afterwards, or from long afterwards. It may focus on what the focalizer knew or thought at the time of the event or how she saw things later, with the benefit of hindsight. In recounting something that happened to her as a child, a narrator may focalize the event through the consciousness of the child she was, restricting the account to what she thought and felt at the time, or she may focalize events through her knowledge and understanding at the time of narration. Or, of course, she may combine these perspectives, moving between what she knew or felt then and what she recognizes now. When third person narration focalizes events through a particular character, it can employ similar variations, recounting how things seemed to the character at the time or how they are perceived later. The choice of temporal focalization makes an enormous difference in a narrative's effects. Detective stories, for instance, recount only what the focalizer knew at each moment of the investigation, saving the knowledge of the outcome for the climax.

2. Distance and speed. The story may be focalized through a microscope, as it were, or through a telescope, proceeding slowly with great detail or quickly telling us what happened: 'The grateful Monarch gave the Prince his daughter's hand in marriage, and when the King died, the Prince succeeded to the throne and reigned happily for many years.' Related to speed are variations in frequency: we can be told what happened on a particular occasion or what happened every Thursday. Most distinctive is what Gérard Genette calls the 'pseudo-iterative', in which something so specific

that it could *not* happen over and over is presented as what regularly happened.

3. Limitations of knowledge. At one extreme, a narrative may focalize the story through a very limited perspective—a 'camera's eye' or 'fly on the wall' perspective—recounting actions without giving us access to characters' thoughts. Even here, great variations can occur depending on what degree of understanding 'objective' or 'external' descriptions imply. Thus, 'the old man lit a cigarette' seems focalized through an observer familiar with human activities, whereas 'the human with whitish hairs on the top of his head held a flaming stick close to him, and smoke began to rise from a white tube attached to his body' seems focalized through a space alien or person who is very 'spaced out'. At the other extreme lies what is called 'omniscient narration' where the focalizer is a godlike figure who has access to the innermost thoughts and hidden motives of the characters: 'The king was pleased beyond measure at the sight, but his greed for gold was still not satisfied.' Omniscient narration, where there seem in principle no limitations on what can be known and told, is common not only in traditional tales but in modern novels, where the choice of what will actually be told is crucial.

Stories focalized primarily through the consciousness of a single character occur both in first person narration, where the narrator tells what he or she thought and observed, and in third person narration, where it is often called 'third person limited point of view', as in *What Maisie Knew*. *Unreliable narration* can result from limitations of point of view—when we gain a sense that the consciousness through which focalization occurs is unable or unwilling to understand the events as competent story-readers would.

These and other variations in narration and focalization do much to determine the overall effect of novels. A story with omniscient narration, detailing the feelings and hidden

motivations of protagonists and displaying knowledge of how events will turn out, may give the impression of the comprehensibility of the world. It may highlight, for example, the contrast between what people intend and what inevitably happens ('Little did he know that two hours later he would be run over by a carriage and all his plans come to naught'). A story told from the *limited* point of view of a single protagonist may highlight the utter unpredictability of what happens: since we don't know what other characters are thinking or what else is going on, everything that occurs to this character may be a surprise. The complications of narrative are further heightened by the embedding of stories within other stories, so that the act of telling a story becomes an event in the story—an event whose consequences and significance become a principal concern. Stories within stories within stories.

Theorists also discuss the function of stories. I mentioned in Chapter 2 that 'narrative display texts', a class which includes both literary narratives and stories people tell one another, circulate because their stories are tellable, 'worth it'. Story-tellers are always warding off the potential question, 'So what?' But what makes a story 'worth it'? What do stories do?

First, they give pleasure—pleasure, Aristotle tells us, through their imitation of life and their rhythm. The narrative patterning that produces a twist, as when the biter is bitten or the tables are turned, gives pleasure in itself, and many narratives have essentially this function: to amuse listeners by giving a new twist to familiar situations.

The pleasure of narrative is linked to desire. Plots tell of desire and what befalls it, but the movement of narrative itself is driven by desire in the form of 'epistemophilia', a desire to know: we want to discover secrets, to know the end, to find the truth. If what drives narrative is the 'masculine' urge to mastery, the desire to unveil the truth (the 'naked

truth'), then what of the knowledge that narrative offers us to satisfy that wish? Is that knowledge itself an effect of desire? Theorists ask such questions about the links between desire, stories, and knowledge.

For stories also have the function, as theorists have emphasized, of teaching us about the world, showing us how it works, enabling us—through the devices of focalization—to see things from other vantage points, and to understand others' motives that in general are opaque to us. The novelist E. M. Forster observes that in offering the possibility of perfect knowledge of others, novels compensate for our dimness about others in 'real' life. Characters in novels

are people whose secret lives are visible or might be visible: we are people whose secret lives are invisible. And that is why novels, even when they are about wicked people, can solace us; they suggest a more comprehensible and thus a more manageable human race, they give us the illusion of perspicacity and of power.

Through the knowledge they present, narratives police. Novels in the Western tradition show how aspirations are tamed and desires adjusted to social reality. Many novels are the story of youthful illusions crushed. They tell us of desire, provoke desire, lay down for us the scenarios of heterosexual desire, and, since the eighteenth century, they have increasingly worked to suggest that we achieve our true identity, if at all, in love, in personal relations, rather than in public action. But as they coach us to believe that there is such a thing as 'being in love', they also subject that idea to demystification.

In so far as we become who we are through a series of identifications (see Chapter 8), novels are a powerful device for the internalization of social norms. But narratives also provide a mode of social criticism. They expose the hollowness of worldly success, the world's corruption, its failure to meet our noblest aspirations. They expose the predicaments

of the oppressed, in stories that invite readers, through identification, to see certain situations as intolerable.

Finally, the basic question for theory in the domain of narrative is this: is narrative a fundamental form of knowledge (giving knowledge of the world through its sense-making) or is it a rhetorical structure that distorts as much as it reveals? Is narrative a source of knowledge or of illusion? Is the knowledge it purports to present a knowledge that is the effect of desire? The theorist Paul de Man observes that while no one in his right mind would try to grow grapes by the light of the word *day*, we find it very hard indeed to avoid conceiving of our lives by patterns of fictional narratives. Does this imply that narratives' clarifying and consoling effects are delusory?

To answer these questions we would need both knowledge of the world that is *independent* of narratives and some basis for deeming this knowledge more authoritative than what narratives provide. But whether there is such authoritative knowledge separate from narrative is precisely what's at stake in the question of whether narrative is a source of knowledge or of illusion. So it seems likely that we cannot answer this question, if indeed it has an answer. Instead we must move back and forth between awareness of narrative as a rhetorical structure that produces the illusion of perspicacity and a study of narrative as the principal kind of sense-making at our disposal. After all, even the exposure of narrative as rhetoric has the structure of a narrative: it is a story in which our initial delusion yields to the harsh light of truth and we emerge sadder but wiser, disillusioned but chastened. We stop dancing around and contemplate the secret. So the story goes.

7 Performative Language

In this chapter I pursue an instance of 'theory' by following a concept that has flourished in literary and cultural theory and whose fortunes illustrate the way ideas change as they are drawn into the realm of 'theory'. The problem of 'performative' language brings into focus important issues concerning meaning and effects of language and leads to questions about identity and the nature of the subject.

The concept of performative utterance was developed in the 1950s by the British philosopher J. L. Austin. He proposed a distinction between two sorts of utterances: *Constative* utterances, such as 'George promised to come,' make a statement, describe a state of affairs, and are true or false. *Performative* utterances, or *performatives*, are not true or false and actually perform the action to which they refer. To say 'I promise to pay you' is not to describe a state of affairs but to perform the act of promising; the utterance is itself the act. Austin writes that when, in a wedding ceremony, the priest or civil official asks, 'Do you take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife?' and I respond 'I do,' I do not describe anything, I do it; 'I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it.' When I say 'I do,' this

performative utterance is neither true nor false. It may be appropriate or inappropriate, depending on the circumstances; it may be 'felicitous' or 'infelicitous' in Austin's terminology. If I say 'I do,' I may not succeed in marrying—if, for example, I am married already or if the person performing the ceremony is not authorized to perform weddings in this community. The utterance will 'misfire', says Austin. The utterance will be unhappy—infelicitous—and so, no doubt, will the bride or groom, or perhaps both.

Performative utterances do not describe but perform the action they designate. It is in pronouncing these words that I promise, order, or marry. A simple test for the performative is the possibility of adding 'hereby' in English before the verb, where *hereby* means 'by uttering these words': 'I hereby promise'; 'We hereby declare our independence'; 'I hereby order you . . .'; but not 'I hereby walk to town'. I can't perform the act of walking by pronouncing certain words.

The distinction between performative and constative captures an important difference between types of utterances and has the great virtue of alerting us to the extent to which language performs actions rather than merely reporting on them. But as Austin pushes further in his account of the performative, he encounters some difficulties. You can draw up a list of 'performative verbs' which in the first person of the present indicative (I promise, I order, I declare) perform the action they designate. But you can't define the performative by listing the verbs that behave in this way, because in the right circumstances you can perform the act of ordering someone to stop by shouting 'Stop!' rather than 'I hereby order you to stop.' The apparently constative statement 'I will pay you tomorrow,' which certainly looks as though it will become either true or false, depending on what happens tomorrow, can, under the right conditions, be a *promise* to pay you, rather than a description or prediction like 'he will pay you tomorrow'. But once you allow for the existence of

such 'implicit performatives', where there is no explicitly performative verb, you have to admit that *any* utterance can be an implicit performative. The sentence 'The cat is on the mat,' your basic constative utterance, can be seen as the elliptical version of 'I hereby affirm that the cat is on the mat,' a performative utterance that accomplishes the act of affirming to which it refers. Constative utterances also perform actions—actions of stating, affirming, describing, and so on. They are, it turns out, a type of performative. This becomes significant at a later stage.

Literary critics have embraced the notion of the performative as one that helps to characterize literary discourse. Theorists have long asserted that we must attend to what literary language *does* as much as to what it *says*, and the concept of the performative provides a linguistic and philosophical justification for this idea: there is a class of utterances that above all do something. Like the performative, the literary utterance does not refer to a prior state of affairs and is not true or false. The literary utterance too *creates* the state of affairs to which it refers, in several respects. First and most simply, it brings into being characters and their actions, for instance. The beginning of Joyce's *Ulysses*, 'Stately plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed,' does not refer to some prior state of affairs but creates this character and this situation. Second, literary works bring into being ideas, concepts, which they deploy. La Rochefoucauld claims that no one would ever have thought of being in love if they hadn't read about it in books, and the notion of romantic love (and of its centrality to the lives of individuals) is arguably a massive literary creation. Certainly novels themselves, from *Don Quixote* to *Madame Bovary*, blame romantic ideas on other books.

In short, the performative brings to centre stage a use of language previously considered marginal—an active,

world-making use of language, which resembles literary language—and helps us to conceive of literature as act or event. The notion of literature as performative contributes to a defence of literature: literature is not frivolous pseudo-statements but takes its place among the acts of language that transform the world, bringing into being the things that they name.

The performative is linked with literature in a second way. In principle at least, the performative breaks the link between meaning and the intention of the speaker, for what act I perform with my words is not determined by my intention but by social and linguistic conventions. The utterance, Austin insists, should not be considered as the outward sign of some inward act which it represents truly or falsely. If I say 'I promise' under appropriate conditions, I have promised, have performed the act of promising, whatever intention I may have had in my head at the time. Since literary utterances are also events where the intention of the author is not thought to be what determines the meaning, the model of the performative seems highly pertinent.

But if literary language is performative and if a performative utterance is not true or false but felicitous or infelicitous, what does it mean for a literary utterance to be felicitous or infelicitous? This turns out to be a complicated matter. On the one hand, *felicity* may be just another name for what critics generally are interested in. Confronted with the opening of Shakespeare's sonnet 'My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun', we ask not whether this utterance is true or false, but what it does, how it fits in with the rest of the poem, and whether it works happily (felicitously) with the other lines. That might be one conception of felicity. But the model of the performative also directs our attention to the conventions that enable an utterance to be a promise or a poem—the conventions of the sonnet, say. The felicitousness of a literary utterance might thus involve its rela-

tion to the conventions of a genre. Does it comply and thus succeed in being a sonnet, rather than a misfire? But more than that, one might imagine, a literary composition is felicitous only when it fully becomes literature by being published, read, and accepted as a literary work, just as a bet becomes a bet only when it is accepted. In short, the notion of literature as performative enjoins us to reflect on the complex problem of what it is for a literary sequence to work.

The next key moment in the fortunes of the performative comes when Jacques Derrida takes up Austin's notion. Austin had distinguished between serious performatives which accomplish something, like promising or marrying, and 'non-serious' utterances. His analysis, he says, applies to words spoken seriously: 'I must not be joking, for example, or writing a poem. Our performative utterances, felicitous or not, are to be understood as issued in ordinary circumstances.' But Derrida argues that what Austin sets aside in appealing to 'ordinary circumstances' are the numerous ways in which bits of language can be repeated—'non-seriously' but also seriously, as an example or a quotation, for instance. This possibility of being repeated in new circumstances is essential to the nature of language; anything that couldn't be repeated in a 'non-serious' fashion wouldn't be language but some mark inextricably tied to a physical situation. The possibility of repetition is basic to language, and performatives in particular can only work if they are recognized as versions of or quotations of regular formulas, such as 'I do,' or 'I promise.' (If the groom said 'OK' rather than 'I do,' he might not succeed in marrying.) 'Could a performative utterance succeed', asks Derrida, 'if its formulation did not repeat a "codified" or iterable [repeatable] form, in other words if the formula that I utter to open a meeting, christen a boat, or undertake marriage were not identifiable as conforming to an iterable model, if it were not

thus identifiable as a kind of citation?' Austin sets aside as anomalous, non-serious, or exceptional particular instances of what Derrida calls a 'general iterability' that should be considered a law of language. General and fundamental, because, for something to be a sign, it must be able to be cited and repeated in all sorts of circumstances, including 'non-serious' ones. Language is performative in the sense that it doesn't just transmit information but performs acts by its repetition of established discursive practices or ways of doing things. This will be important to the later fortunes of the performative.

Derrida also relates the performative to the general problem of acts that originate or inaugurate, acts that create something new, in the political as well as literary sphere. What is the relationship between a political act, like a declaration of independence, that creates a new situation, and literary utterances, that try to invent something new, in acts that are not constative statements but are performative, like promises? Both the political and the literary act depend on a complex, paradoxical combination of the performative and constative, where in order to succeed, the act must convince by referring to states of affairs but where success consists of bringing into being the condition to which it refers. Literary works claim to tell us about the world, but if they succeed they do so by bringing into being the characters and events they relate. Something similar is at work in inaugural acts in the political sphere. In the 'Declaration of Independence' of the United States, for example, the key sentence runs: 'We therefore . . . do solemnly publish and declare that these United colonies are and of right ought to be free and independent states.' The declaration that these *are* independent states is a performative that is supposed to create the new reality to which it refers, but to support this claim is joined the constative assertion that they *ought* to be independent states.

The tension between the performative and constative emerges clearly also in literature, where the difficulty Austin encounters of separating performative and constative can be seen as a crucial feature of the functioning of language. If every utterance is both performative and constative, including at least an implicit assertion of a state of affairs and a linguistic act, the relation between what an utterance says and what it does is not necessarily harmonious or cooperative. To see what is involved in the literary sphere, let us come back to Robert Frost's poem 'The Secret Sits':

We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

This poem depends on the opposition between supposing and knowing. To explore what attitude the poem takes to this opposition, what values it attaches to its opposing terms, we might ask whether the poem itself is in the mode of supposing or of knowing. Does the poem suppose, like 'we' who dance round, or does it know, like the secret? We might imagine that, as a product of the human imagination, the poem would be an example of supposing, a case of dancing around, but its gnomic, proverbial character, and its confident declaration that the secret 'knows', makes it seem very knowing indeed. So we can't be sure. But what does the poem show us about knowing? Well, the secret, which is something that one knows or does not know—thus, an *object* of knowing—here becomes by metonymy or contiguity the *subject* of knowing, *what knows* rather than *what is or is not known*. By capitalizing and personifying the entity, the Secret, the poem performs a rhetorical operation that promotes the object of knowledge to the position of subject. It thus shows us that a rhetorical supposition can produce the knower, can make the secret into a subject, a character in this little drama. The secret who knows is produced by an act of supposing, which moves the secret from the

place of the object (*Someone knows a secret*) to the place of the subject (*The Secret knows*). The poem thus shows that its constative assertion, that the secret knows, depends on a performative supposing: the supposing that makes the secret into the subject supposed to know. The sentence *says* that the Secret knows but it *shows* that this is a supposition.

At this stage in the history of the performative, the contrast between constative and performative has been redefined: the constative is language claiming to represent things as they are, to name things that are already there, and the performative is the rhetorical operations, the acts of language, that undermine this claim by imposing linguistic categories, bringing things into being, organizing the world rather than simply representing what is. We can identify here what is called an 'aporia' between performative and constative language. An 'aporia' is the 'impasse' of an undecidable oscillation, as when the chicken depends upon the egg but the egg depends on the chicken. The only way to claim that language functions performatively to shape the world is through a constative utterance, such as 'Language shapes the world'; but contrariwise, there is no way to claim the constative transparency of language except by a speech act. The propositions which perform the act of stating necessarily claim to do nothing but merely display things as they are; yet if you want to show the contrary—that claims to represent things as they are in fact impose their categories on the world—you have no way to do this except through claims about what is or is not the case. The argument that the act of stating or describing is in fact performative must take the form of constative statements.

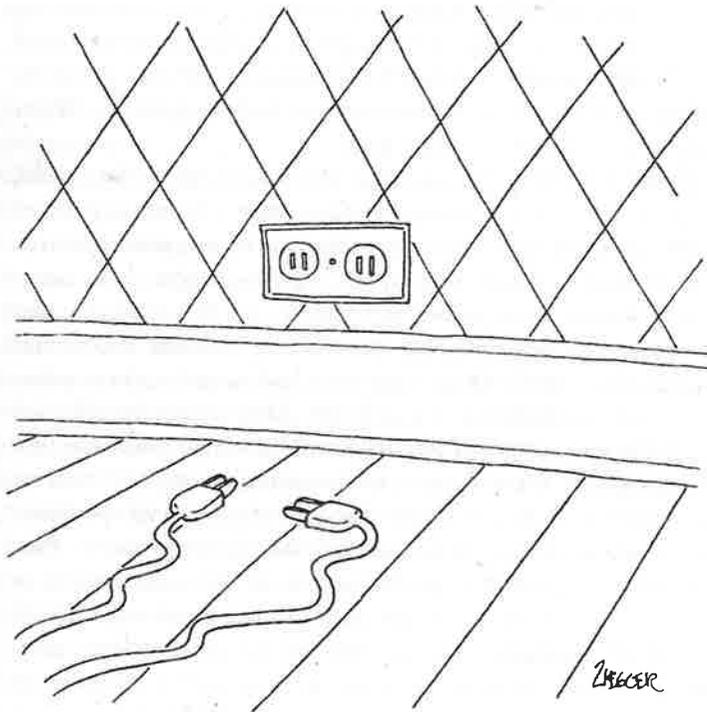
The latest moment of this little history of the performative is the emergence of a 'performative theory of gender and sexuality' in feminist theory and in gay and lesbian studies. The key figure here is the American philosopher Judith But-

ler, whose books *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), *Bodies that Matter* (1993), and *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Speech Act* (1997), have had great influence in the field of literary and cultural studies, particularly in feminist theory, and in the emerging field of gay and lesbian studies. The name 'Queer Theory' has recently been adopted by the avant-garde of gay studies whose work in cultural theory is linked with political movements for gay liberation. It takes as its own name and throws back at society the most common insult that homosexuals encounter, the epithet 'Queer!' The gamble is that flaunting this name can change its meaning and make it a badge of honour rather than an insult. Here a theoretical project is emulating the tactics of the most visible activist organizations involved in the fight against AIDS—the group ACT-UP, for instance, which in their demonstrations use such slogans as 'We're here, we're queer, get used to it!'

Butler's *Gender Trouble* takes issue with the notion, common in American feminist writing, that a feminist politics requires a notion of feminine identity, of essential features which women share as women and which give them common interests and goals. For Butler, on the contrary, the fundamental categories of identity are cultural and social productions, more likely to be the *result* of political cooperation than its condition of possibility. They create the effect of the natural (remember Aretha Franklin's 'You make me feel like a natural woman') and by imposing norms (definitions of what it is to be a woman) they threaten to exclude those who don't conform. In *Gender Trouble* Butler proposes that we consider gender as performative, in the sense that it is not what one is but what one does. A man is not what one is but something one does, a condition one enacts. Your gender is created by your acts, in the way that a promise is created by the act of promising. You become a man or a woman by repeated acts, which, like Austin's performatives,

depend on social conventions, habitual ways of doing something in a culture. Just as there are regular, socially established ways of promising, making a bet, giving orders, and getting married, so there are socially established ways of being a man or being a woman.

This does not mean that gender is a choice, a role you put on, as you choose clothes to put on in the morning. That would suggest that there is an ungendered subject prior to gender who chooses, whereas in fact to be a subject at all is to be gendered: you can't, in this regime of gender, be a



'The one on the left is cute.'

person without being male or female. 'Subjected to gender but subjectivated [made a subject] by gender,' writes Butler in *Bodies that Matter*, 'the "I" neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves.' Nor should the performativity of gender be thought of as a singular act, something accomplished by a single act; rather, it is 'the reiterative and citational practice', the compulsory repetition of gender norms that animate and constrain the gendered subject but which are also the resources from which resistance, subversions, and displacement are forged.

From this viewpoint, the utterance 'It's a girl!' or 'It's a boy!' by which a baby is, traditionally, welcomed into the world, is less a constative utterance (true or false, according to the situation) than the first in a long series of performatives that create the subject whose arrival they announce. The naming of the girl initiates a continuous process of 'girling', the making of a girl, through an 'assignment' of compulsory repetition of gender norms, 'the forcible citation of a norm'. To be a subject at all is to be given this assignment of repetition, but—and this is important for Butler—an assignment which we never quite carry out according to expectation, so that we never quite inhabit the gender norms or ideals we are compelled to approximate. In that gap, in the different ways of carrying out the gender's 'assignment', lie possibilities for resistance and change.

Stress falls here on the way the performative force of language comes from the repetition of prior norms, prior acts. So, the force of the insult 'Queer!' comes not from the intention or authority of the speaker, who is most likely some fool quite unknown to the victim, but from the fact that the shout 'Queer' repeats shouted insults of the past, interpellations or acts of address which produce the homosexual subject through reiterated shaming or abjection

(*abjection* involves treating something as beyond the pale: 'anything but that!'). Butler writes,

'Queer' derives its force precisely through the repeated . . . invocation by which a social bond among homophobic communities is formed through time. The interpellation echoes past interpellations, and binds the speakers, as if they spoke in unison across time. In this sense it is always an imaginary chorus that taunts 'queer!'

What gives the insult its performative force is not the repetition itself but the fact that it is recognized as conforming to a model, a norm, and is linked with a history of exclusion. The utterance implies that the speaker is the spokesman for what is 'normal' and works to constitute the addressee as beyond the pale. It is the repetition, the citation of a formula which is linked to norms sustaining a history of oppression, that gives a special force and viciousness to otherwise banal insults such as 'nigger' or 'kike'. They accumulate the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices, speaking as if with the voice of all the taunts of the past.

But the performative's link with the past implies the possibility of deflecting or redirecting the weight of the past, by attempting to capture and redirect the terms that carry an oppressive signification, as in the adoption of 'Queer' by homosexuals themselves. It's not that you become autonomous by choosing your name: names always carry historical weight and are subject to the uses others will make of them in the future. You can't control the terms that you choose to name yourselves. But the historical character of the performative process creates the possibility of a political struggle.

Now it is obvious that the distance between the beginning and the (provisional) end of this story is very great. For Austin, the concept of the performative helps us to think

about a particular aspect of language neglected by prior philosophers; for Butler, it is a model for thinking about crucial social processes where a number of matters are at stake: (1) the nature of identity and how it is produced; (2) the functioning of social norms; (3) the fundamental problem of what today we call 'agency' in English: how far and under what conditions can I be a responsible subject who chooses my acts; and (4) the relationship between the individual and social change.

There is, thus, a big difference between what is at stake for Austin and for Butler. And they seem to have principally in view different sorts of acts. Austin is interested in how the repetition of a formula on a single occasion makes something happen (you made a promise). For Butler this is a special case of the massive and obligatory repetition that produces historical and social realities (you become a woman).

This difference, in fact, brings us back to the problem about the nature of the literary event, where there are also two ways of thinking of it as performative. We can say that the literary work accomplishes a singular, specific act. It creates that reality which is the work, and its sentences accomplish something in particular in that work. For each work, one can try to specify what it and its parts accomplish, just as one can try to spell out what is promised in a particular act of promising. This, one might say, is the Austinian version of the literary event.

But on the other hand, we could also say that a work succeeds, becomes an event, by a massive repetition that takes up norms and, possibly, changes things. If a novel happens, it does so because, in its singularity, it inspires a passion that gives life to these forms, in acts of reading and recollection, repeating its inflection of the conventions of the novel and, perhaps, effecting an alteration in the norms or the forms through which readers go on to confront the

world. A poem may very well disappear without a trace, but it may also trace itself in memories and give rise to acts of repetition. Its performativity isn't a singular act accomplished once and for all but a repetition that gives life to forms it repeats.

The concept of the performative, in the history I have outlined, brings together a series of issues that are crucial to 'theory'. Let me just list them:

First, how to think about the shaping role of language: do we try to limit it to certain specific acts, where we think we can say with confidence what it does, or do we try to gauge the broader effects of language, as it organizes our encounters with the world?

Second, how should we conceive of the relation between social conventions and individual acts? It is tempting, but too simple, to imagine that social conventions are like the scenery or background against which we decide how to act. Theories of the performative offer better accounts of the entanglement of norm and action, whether presenting conventions as the condition of possibility of events, as in Austin, or else, as in Butler, seeing action as obligatory repetition, which may nevertheless deviate from the norms. Literature, which is supposed to 'make it new' in a space of convention, calls for a performative account of norm and event.

Third, how should one conceive of the relation between what language does and what it says? This is the basic problem of the performative: can there be a harmonious fusion of doing and saying or is there an unavoidable tension here that governs and complicates all textual activity?

Finally, how, in this postmodern age, should we think of the event? It has become commonplace in the United States, for instance, in this age of mass media, to say that what happens on television 'happens period', is a real event.

Whether the image corresponds to a reality or not, the mediatic event is a genuine event to be reckoned with. The model of the performative offers a more sophisticated account of issues that are often crudely stated as a blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction. And the problem of literary event, of literature as act, can offer a model for thinking about cultural events generally.

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