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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. Primarily, 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
in the work of Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, performativity has enabled a powerful appreciation of the ways that identities are constructed iteratively through complex citational processes. If one consequence of this appreciation has been a heightened willingness to credit a performative dimension in all ritual, ceremonial, scripted behaviors, another would be the acknowledgment that philosophical essays themselves surely count as one such performative instance. The irony is that, while philosophy has begun to shed some of its anti-theatrical prejudices, theater studies have been attempting, meanwhile, to take themselves out of (the) theater. Reimagining itself over the course of the past decade as the wider field of performance studies, the discipline has moved well beyond the classical ontology of the black box model to embrace a myriad of performance practices, ranging from stage to festival and everything in between: film, photography, television, computer simulation, music, “performance art,” political demonstrations, health care, cooking, fashion, shamanistic ritual... Given these divergent developments, it makes abundant sense that performativity’s recent history has been marked by cross-purposes. For while philosophy and theater now share “performativity” as a common lexical item, the term has hardly come to mean “the same thing” for each. Indeed, the stretch between theatrical and deconstructive meanings of “performativity” seems to span the polarities of, at either extreme, the extroversive of the actor, the introversion of the signifier. Michael Fried’s opposition between theatricality and absorption seems custom-made for this paradox about “performativity”: in its deconstructive sense, performativity signals absorption; in the vicinity of the stage, however, the performative is the theatrical. But in another range of usages, a text like Lyotard’s The Postmodern Condition uses “performativity” to mean an extreme of something like efficiency—postmodern representation as a form of capitalist efficiency—while, again, the deconstructive “performativity” of Paul de Man or J. Hillis Miller seems to be characterized by the dislinkage precisely of cause and effect between the signifier and the world. 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 introspectively nonreferential. Following de Man’s demonstration of “a radical estrangement between the meaning and the performance of any text” (298), one might want to dwell not so much on the nonreference of the performative, but rather on (what de Man calls) its necessarily “aberrant” relation to its own reference—the torsion, the mutual perversion, as one might say, of reference and performativity.

Significantly, perversion had already made a cameo appearance in How to Do Things with Words in a passage where the philosophical and theatrical meanings of performative actually do establish contact with each other. After provisionally distinguishing in his first lecture constants 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 “in felicity,” 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”:

[4] 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 enclitization 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?" (Margin, 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 (v.) 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

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 Austrian "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.*

"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:
condensations: of the complex producing and underwriting relations on the “hither” side of the utterance, and of the no-less-constraining 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, 154].) “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 latched 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 Austrian interest in provisionally distinguishing what is being said from the “act” of saying it.”

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 infection, 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 structure 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, theatre 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