

## THE STRONG PERFORMATIVE

The belief that the spoken word is charged with magical power—that language can influence reality and words can bring about change—goes back to primitive origins. Incantations, invocations, enchantments, spells, and prayers are all ritual and institutional acts relying on word magic, or, what I will later call strong performativity; they are efforts believed to control natural (and supernatural) forces by words. Since ancient times poets and seers have been known as not only seeing and conveying their vision, but also using language as such magic. This belief in the power of the uttered word underlies the everyday custom of wishing good luck, wishing good health when taking a drink or sneezing. One still hopes that the word can influence the management of the world.

Of course, word magic is not just an element of the imaginative paraphernalia of poetry, religion, or shamanism, but a significant topic—under the name *performative*—in the philosophy of language too. The potential of the word as action came to be seriously theorized in the first decades of the 20th century, some time before J. L. Austin, whose complex elaboration of the performative and the speech act in the 1950s provided the foundation for later pragmaticist as well as poststructuralist theories.

### **The performative: early history**

The first phase of the history of the concept of the performative embraces roughly the period between the 1910s and the 1970s, with its heyday probably from the early 1950s to the mid-1970s. Coinciding with the time of the modern episteme in philosophy, linguistics, and literary theory, this early conceptualization of performativity exhibits several traits of the formalist-structuralist paradigm. Taking for granted the centrality of the binary between the signifier and the signified, or the sign anchored in reality, the period is marked by a search for comparable conceptual binaries underlying social and cultural formations, an interest in universal patterns in everyday language, as well as a pragmatic understanding of meaning, whose stability has not been questioned yet. Exhibiting the “power of the word,” the performative was understood in this epistemic framework as a language structure capable of creating something outside lan-

guage; in my terminology, this is the case of strong performativity, where the signifier brings about a signified. Moreover, the presence of an outside (transcendental) authority—or at least a speaker with a particular intention—was assumed to be necessary to validate the act, to make the words powerful. Speech act theory born between the 1950s and '70s took off from the constative-performative dichotomy, taking for granted, even in the locutionary-illocutionary-perlocutionary triad, the binarity of language processes as foregrounded in reference. All along, the binaries, understood as transformations of the signifier/signified dichotomy—such as word and thing, word and deed, saying and doing—remained uncontested within the presuppositional matrix of the concept of the performative.

Adolf Reinach was probably the first to come up, already in 1913, with a theory of “social acts,” defining them as acts “performed in the very act of speaking” (“The Apriori Foundations” 36). Among social acts Reinach included promise and command, as well as requesting, admonishing, questioning, informing, and answering, all rooted in “common consciousness,” the *a priori* theory of law, or the universal grammar of human institutions. Marcel Mauss, best known for his theory of the gift, studied “verbal gifts,” or the “giving of one’s word,” from an ethnographic perspective, and decided that such acts as the giving of gifts were “ritual acts,” involving agents, actions, social conventions, and common beliefs (“Essai”). Erwin Koschmieder, in writings published in the 1930s and '40s, came up with the most extensive theory of speech acts to date. A Slavic scholar teaching at Breslau, Vilnius, and Munich, Koschmieder postulated a new “case of coincidence” of utterance and action through examples (which Austin will use and make famous) such as “I hereby bless him” and “I hereby open the meeting,” in which “action arises” (“Zur Bestimmung” 26–27). Here action is described as not just coincidental with the utterance, but as having no existence apart from the utterance. In 1934, Karl Bühler distinguished between three functions of language: representation, expression or intimation, and appeal or arousal. The last one he also considered the signal function of language: through signals speakers perform actions and make others perform them too (*Theory*). The utterance “*Es regnet*,” for example, has the signal function in that it provokes practical consequences (of taking an umbrella, for example); such “speech actions,” in other words, have the goal of steering others to action.

Underlying the ideas of acts performed by speech and acts brought about by words is the relatively novel understanding of meaning as use. Already in the 1920s Alan Gardiner, the main representative of British contextualism, differentiated between language as system and its use, or speech as action (“Definition,” “Some Thoughts”). At the same time the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski described language as having an “essentially pragmatic character” (316), and connected language, context, use, and action in this pragmatic dimension. He claimed that language functions were contextually determined by situation, including both linguistic and cultural context, and considered language

to be part of ordinary activities, often the activity itself, or a “mode of action” producing cooperation between people (315). Preceding Wittgenstein by some 30 years, Malinowski insisted that the meaning of a word lay in its use: “A word *means* to a native the proper use of the thing for which it stands” (321). “A word is used when it can produce an action, and not to describe one, still less to translate thoughts” (321). American pragmatism and analytic philosophy, especially English ordinary language philosophy, further developed this idea. In the American tradition, Charles S. Peirce defined semiosis as action and process, involving a relation between sign, object, and interpretant (*Collected Papers*); William James’s moral and epistemological pragmatism was rooted in psychology; John Dewey practiced behaviorist pragmatism; while Charles W. Morris emphasized the interactive pattern of human communication, where language use depends on the interpretation as well as production of signs (*Signs*). In England the two schools of analytic philosophy both generated pragmatic ideas: Oxford (Gilbert Ryle, Austin, Peter Strawson, and H. Paul Grice) and Cambridge (Bertrand Russell, George Edward Moore), with Ludwig Wittgenstein contributing to both schools, as well as mediating between the Vienna Circle and ordinary language philosophy. With Austin, Oxford philosophy crossed the Atlantic, to be disseminated by two Berkeley professors, Grice and Austin’s student John Searle.

Wittgenstein formulated the claim more publicly than many of his predecessors that the meaning of language resides in its use: “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (*Philosophical* §23); “it is the particular use of a word only which gives the word its meaning” (*Blue* 69). “A meaning of a word is a kind of employment of it. For it is what we learn when the word is incorporated into our language” (*On Certainty* §61). From the idea of meaning as use, Wittgenstein arrived at the idea of he called language games, those “forms of language with which a child begins to make use of words” (*Blue* 17). In this framework children will be able to learn their native language by means of language games, consisting of both “language and the actions into which it is woven” (*Philosophical* §7). The utterances derive their meaning from being part of activities of the language games he lists in *Philosophical Investigations*:

- Giving orders and obeying them—
- Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements—
- Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)—
- Reporting an event—
- Forming and testing a hypothesis—
- Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams—
- Making up a story; and reading it—
- Play-acting—
- Singing catches—
- Guessing riddles—
- Making a joke; telling it—

Solving a problem in practical arithmetic—  
 Translating from one language into another—  
 Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, and praying. (§23)

It is not difficult to see the performative nature of these acts, and a “family resemblance,” to use another Wittgensteinian term, between language games and performatives; of the language games listed by Wittgenstein, several are performatives (for example, giving orders, reporting events, thanking, cursing, greeting). Wittgenstein was indeed, as Douglas Robinson puts it, “exploding towards the performative” (*Performative* 29).

Austin was developing his theory of speech acts from 1939 on, especially in his conference lecture and article “Other Minds” (1946), his Oxford lectures in the 1940s and 50s on “Words and Deeds,” and his William James lectures given at Harvard from 1955, to be published posthumously in 1962 [Austin died in 1960] as *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin was deeply influenced by the contextualism of Gardiner, the theories of Malinowski (whom he never mentions), as well as Morris’s distinction between syntax, semantics, and pragmatics (even though he never uses the word pragmatics, preferring “linguistic phenomenology” instead [“Plea” 182]). But by establishing a linguistic function other than stating facts, Austin clearly broke with British empiricist thought.

Austin’s theory of speech acts hinges on the concept of the performative. He developed first his theory of constatives and performatives, and then his integrated theory of speech acts. In these lectures he discussed those sentences which can be looked at as performing an act or a ritual, or as entering into a contract or commitment. When performing acts, the speakers of utterances used to perform certain acts (to make a promise, to apologize, to pass a sentence, to name, among others) are agents, whose actions are capable of bringing about changes in the world. To take a non-Austinian example, one from American literature, when Captain Ahab performs his baptismal ceremony, deliriously howling, “*Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli*” (Melville 462), he evokes the Christian ceremony while at the same time turns it ironically upside down. As such, since he both baptizes and baptizes with a difference, he acts doubly as an agent, twice making a change in the world. Such utterances whereby agents perform actions are the performatives. Performatives are defined as non-descriptive utterances, as utterances with the force of actions. Much like the rules of chess constitute the game of chess, utterances comply with certain constitutive rules, shared by all participants.

In his grand theory, then, Austin considered language both as a mode of knowledge and action, insisting that language had two functions: description and performance, manifest in the constative and the performative, respectively. Constative utterances are descriptive statements and express a “scientific” aspect of language: either true or false, their truth value depends on the state of affairs

they describe or speak about. For example, we accept the constative utterance “The wall is painted red” as true if it corresponds to certain facts in reality, namely, if the wall is indeed red. The constative is basically informed by the metaphysical assumption that it is possible to perceive the world the way it “really” is, to posit a self-same relationship between reference and phenomena. The performative seems to override this self-same relationship between signifier and signified in the sense that it brings the two levels together: the performative *creates* the thing itself instead of *referring* to it. Austin’s examples include ceremonial statements such as “I promise,” “I do [take this man to be my lawful wedded husband]” (uttered in the course of a marriage ceremony), and “I name this ship the *Queen Elisabeth*” (uttered when smashing the bottle against the stem of a ship). In performative utterances such as “I promise to return the book to the library tonight,” saying the sentence does the promising. To make such statements in appropriate circumstances is not to describe or state, but rather to do something, to perform an act. Performatives reflect the dramatic aspect of speech: they constitute language in terms of action. Performative utterances are not true or false, but have force, performative force: they make the actions come about, and establish a certain binding responsibility on the part of the speaker for the action performed.

Lacking truth value, the performative can be either felicitous or infelicitous—in other words, can either be powerful or fall flat. For it being felicitous certain conditions must hold, which Austin called felicity conditions. The force of the performative depends on the satisfaction of particular institutional and conventional conditions; these are contextual parameters, including a shared knowledge of pre-existing conventions, assumptions, or codes, a common ground of institutional practices. In other words, performatives have force from the social, institutional, or cultural context they are embedded in. In addition to institutional conditions, certain other conventions must also be satisfied for a performative utterance to be happy: these conditions appear in the form of statements, or presuppositions, which must be true. Austin considers the truth of presuppositions as precondition of felicitous acts primarily in the context of reference.

Austin developed his theory of three speech acts, acts performed in and by language, in the later William James lectures. The three acts he differentiated were the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. He described the locutionary acts as the acts of saying something, “roughly equivalent to ‘meaning’ in the traditional sense” (*How To Do* 108); illocutionary acts as those performed in saying something, “utterances which have a certain [conventional] force” (*How To Do* 108); and perlocutionary acts as acts having certain consequential effects, “what we bring about or achieve *by* saying something” (*How To Do* 108). This tripartite model assumes that every utterance has an illocutionary force, that is, all speech acts are performative.

Austin suggested that acts that philosophers and linguists considered constatives at the time—such as stating facts, giving information, or giving a

description—should rather be viewed as a special class of illocutionary acts. In this framework, the constative is considered just one subset of the performative, where performatives can give rise to constatives and stating, and reference is also being considered performative. With the constative element collapsed into the performative, the illocutionary and the performative emerge as the general terms, while the constative, its primacy cancelled, is reduced into a special case of the performative. Every utterance is primarily an act performed while saying something; therefore, every speech act is always performative.

The performative force is understood as independent of whether it is an explicit performative, with the appropriate performative formula (“I promise”) making it clear “how what is said is to be understood” (*How To Do* 70), or an implicit performative, where the conventionally predictable verb is missing (“I will be there tonight”). An underlying performative clause was later posited for every utterance by John R. Ross (“Declarative”), George Lakoff (“Linguistics”), and Jerrold Sadock (*Towards a Linguistic Theory*, “Aspects”), who developed the general theory of the performative hypothesis, claiming that every utterance contained as its higher clause a performative verb, therefore every utterance is performative. All utterances are speech acts, even when they lack the speech act verbs—the so-called “explicit performative preface” (Stampe 2) or “speech act formulae” (Mey, *Pragmatics* 107). With the performative formula of the explicit performative as “neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the recognition of . . . performatives,” as Sadock notes (*Towards a Linguistic Theory* 58), the performative’s primacy and universality is established.

The performative hypothesis also posits the public, conventional, and institutional as well as interactional nature of all communication, and assumes the performative to be culture-dependent (Marmaridou 186, 194). “Speaking a language,” Searle claims, “is performing acts according to rules” (*Speech Acts* 36–7). Speech acts are taken to be social acts in the sense that they do not depend on the beliefs or thoughts of “any one individual that happens to be its agent” (Tsohatzidis, “Paradox” 237). Mary Louise Pratt also emphasized the public character of the speech act, insisting that literary works were public, institutional, speech acts, lacking any personalized addressee, but promoting the playing of generalized social roles (“Ideology”). Mey calls this latter element pragmatic acting, and claims that it is a contextualized, adaptive human behavior (*Pragmatics*). Its context is made up of convention, culture, and social structure, against whose background interlocutors try to influence one another, as well as make changes in the world.

### **Logos, the originary instance of the strong performative: some Biblical examples**

Logocentrism is the term which Jacques Derrida uses for the position that the stability of language—as well as systems of thought in general—rests on external anchors: the authority of the transcendental signified (“God”), or the signified which pre-exists, and has an independent existence from, the signifier. Identifying logocentrism as “the exigent, powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire for [the] signified” (*Of Grammatology* 49) permeating Western thought, Derrida claims that it posits a “necessity of relationship between . . . signifiers and signified . . . between the order of phonic signifiers and the content of the signifieds” (44). I want to tie my first, “originary” type of performative to this logocentric way of thinking in the sense that here words are believed to indeed make present, by bringing about, the signified evoked by the performative utterance. In this case the performative will indeed be validated from the outside: by its power to bring about “things” external to language—things “out there.”

The foundational moment of logocentrism, when God creates by the *logos*, exploits performative power, the “power of the word,” in a rather obvious manner. Tying the signifier to the signified, the word brings about presence in the world “out there.” Indeed, the narrative of origin related at the very beginning of *Genesis* abounds in instances when words make things, and saying and doing are one: “Let there be light,”<sup>1</sup> “Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters,” or “Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (Gen. 1: 3, 6, 26). This “Ur-performative” is evoked emphatically at the beginning of the New Testament: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God” (John 1: 1). Commonly referred to as word magic or the power of words, and variably termed in speech act theory as illocutionary acts (Austin, *How to Do* 108), acts of “originary performativity” (Derrida, *Specters* 36–37), “linguistic magic” (Fotion 51), or “performative sorcery” (Loxley 51), these are cases with a strong performative force, where the word as a vehicle of creation is used to produce some new reality. Man’s whole existence rests on the power of God’s word: “man lives from every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD” (Deut. 8:3).

God creates the world by virtue of his own agency; as the Almighty, he is the absolute Agent or Subject, whose position in the sentence is fixed by Divine Law. This Law, conveyed in the *Decalogs* or *Decalogue* and reinscribed in subsequent laws, forbids man to refer to Him by the name or give his visual representation. When Moses asks his name, he says, “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex. 3:14) (in other translations, “I AM THAT I AM”). And when Moses rephrases his question, asking really for a nominal form to be used in the object position in a sentence, God replies, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations are from the *New Geneva Study Bible*.

you” (Ex. 3:14). In other words, there is no way to put God in the object position: his name cannot be referred to with a nominal, only by reiterating his subjecthood or self-existence, “I AM.” In this text, it is indeed, as Émile Benveniste claims of subjectivity in general, “in and through language that man constitutes himself as a *subject*, because language alone establishes the concept of ‘ego’ in reality, in *its* reality which is that of the being” (“Subjectivity” 729; emphasis in original). God’s subjectivity is truly a property of language: “[e]go’ is he who *says* ‘ego’” (729; emphasis in original). In other words: God’s ego comes about discursively and performatively: by uttering the performative *ego*: “I AM.”

“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain,” says the third commandment (Ex. 20:7). By the same token, creating a visual object out of God is also forbidden: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image,” the second commandment insists (Ex. 20:4). God will not be reduced to an icon to be looked at or an idol, the Lacanian *objet a* of the gaze (*Four Fundamental* 112–113). If God pleases, he shall reveal Himself, but by not showing his face during his theophanies to Moses, He cannot be the object of the gaze of either Moses or subsequent human imagination.

Speech act theory allows us to make several claims about the logocentric (strong) performative of the Almighty Subject. First, these are performative acts with a tremendous performative force indeed: words make a world. Second, utterance is coincidental with action; action has no existence apart from the utterance. Third, these are acts of self-referentiality: they have, to apply Benveniste’s apt characterization of the performative in general, the “peculiar quality” of “referring to a reality that [they themselves] constitute,” making, Benveniste claims, “the signified . . . identical to the referent” (*Problems* 236). Indeed, at the time when God’s Ur-performative is uttered, there is no “world” yet for which the word could stand: that world is just being made, brought about performatively by the word. God’s performative, and its being both act and language, will not allow representation, the *stat pro* of mimicability, to be taken as the universal or standard semiotic idiom. Rather, as an act of self-presence uttered by the ultimate Subject, it conjoins word and world, causing its own truth: creation.

My reading of the story of biblical creation by word up to now was moved basically by the theoretical apparatus developed in linguistics, philosophy of language, and pragmatics during the first, pre-mid-1970s phase of the history of the concept. Since the mid-1970s, however, new approaches have entered the study and application of the concept of the performative, causing “theoretism,” as Jacques Derrida points out, “in the particular forms that triumphed at the very beginning of the 1960s, to show their age both within philosophy” (*Negotiations* 78). Derrida is obviously referring to structuralism, which I described elsewhere as the depth model *par excellence* of the modern episteme, characterized, among others, by dichotomies of inside and outside, essence and appearance, latent and manifest (“Dangerous Liaisons”). Derrida sees the reason for a growing interest in

pragmatics in its capacity to displace such either/or methodologies geared at “either the external conditions or the intrinsic content of a text” (78). “[F]astening on the performative dimensions of discourse or writing” (78), poststructuralist theories have managed to conjoin, Derrida insists, “external analysis of the situation” and “internal analysis of content” (79), and turned “to analyze the performativity of writing itself” (79). Moreover, with the poststructuralist approach the constative/performative distinction returns with a difference, as a highly problematic dichotomy. This return with a difference will lead to at least three admissions. First, the constative, informed by the assumption of some stable referential meaning, will no longer be considered a transparent notion. Instead, being posited as one subset of the performative, the performativity of stating and reference will serve as an argument supporting the claim of poststructuralism about meaning being, as Catherine Belsey points out, “differential, not referential” (*Poststructuralism* 10). Second, instead of fixing the relationship between word and thing (as the dichotomy of the signifier and signified was fixed and hierarchical in the way *logos* was understood: once created, it was there as a signified, with primacy over the signifier), the performative came to function within the realm of the signifier only, extending to all kinds of linguistic processes at work in the text, such as the performative construction of the subject and the performativity of writing and reading. Third, constativity and performativity will cease to be easily differentiated conceptual schemes, but such rather which exhibit strong traits of undecidability and aporia.

Viewed from the poststructuralist (especially deconstructivist) perspective, then, God does not only assign a form of ontology to his creations, but also produces himself as Creator Almighty. So his self-positioning as subject does not pre-exist the originary logocentric moment; rather, his subjecthood and agency are the effects of this performative drama. Furthermore, God as transcendental signified uses the *logos* to create the world while the *logos* as transcendental signifier creates God. This is the instance when, as Derrida claims elsewhere, the word as “son” of a “fathering origin” creates the Divine Father (“The Father” 1843).

God’s performative, however, contains an inherent contradiction throughout, reflecting on the impossibility of any founding act. His words are acts indeed, whereby the world is created. As acts of authority and primal agency, they are unique and singular—as well as, it would seem, acts of self-presence. This is where, I suggest, the contradiction lies. In this originary moment, God creates the world by fathering the word; his act requires self-presence, the presence of his authorizing ego. This is the very moment when, as Derrida puts it, “living *logos* is alive in that it has a living father . . . that is *present*, standing near it, behind it, within it, sustaining it with his rectitude, attending it in person in his own name” (“The Father” 1841). However, already in this founding act, he as Father, in a gesture of deferral, delegates his power to the son, the word, allowing for the possibility of doing away with self-presence. Moreover, no matter how

unprecedented and unrepeatable his founding act is, his words can gain their power and significance only from the tradition they are embedded in: from being conventional and citational. In the absence of the Father to enable his son the *logos*, convention will validate this moment and allow it to be repeated, iterated, in similar future acts, among them, naming, swearing, blessing, cursing, promising, making vows, or performing rites calling for divine intervention. These performative acts gain their power from iteration: from repeating with a difference the originary performative, where God as Father of the *logos* created the world.

Naming is the iterable act *par excellence*, since it must be performed with each object and individual. When God gives names to his creations, he secures his power over them by names that cause their own truth in a particular way: by predicting future events or character traits. God's performative of naming is therefore not arbitrary, but posits and indexical relationship between name and its bearer. The Bible is the compendium of such talking names. For example, he renames Abram for Abraham, making him a "high father," the "father of many nations": "I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make many nations of you, and kings shall come from you" (Gen. 17: 5, 6). Next, he renames Sarai to Sarah, thereby securing her position as a princess to be followed by noble descendants. By receiving their new covenant names, the patriarch and the matriarch are brought under God's rule and are given a sacred mission. However, some names seem to verge between description and performance, capturing, in a constative manner, a particular state of affairs, while at the same time retaining performative force as well. Isaac, for example, bears the name meaning laughter because at his birth the mother laughed for joy at the supernatural work of grace; due to the performative power of the word, however, the choice of his name will act as a forecast of happiness. Esau received his name (meaning hairy) for being "like a hairy garment all over" (Gen. 25:25), while his twin brother was called Jacob because at birth "his hand took hold of Esau's heel" (Gen. 25:26). In addition to such constative function, both names trigger, performatively, future events.

Problematizing the issue of self-presence, other kinds of performatives follow, in an iterative manner, the model set down by God's originary performative. Swearing "to himself" (Gen. 22: 16), for example, God blesses his people, thereby guaranteeing that they multiply in the future: "blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which *is* on the seashore" (Gen. 22: 17). He establishes a binding responsibility for the truth of his actions, and, expecting the same from his people, offers his act for future iteration: "When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it; for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and it would be a sin to you" (Deut. 23: 21). God performs the originary act of promising, providing a model for his people, those empowered by his word, for future promises. This is an act of promising *par excellence* not only because it is presented as an originary first act, but also because it is the ultimate model for all

later vows and promises, the “standard promise,” which J. Hillis Miller describes as those made significantly by “an ‘I,’ ego, or subject, a person, ideally male, in full possession of his senses, speaking in the present with deliberate intention, and uttering ‘I promise so and so’” (*Speech Acts* 79). First establishing a hierarchy between vows and promises, the text claims that all promises, and in fact all words, are binding. “That which has gone from your lips you shall keep and perform, for you voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God what you have promised with your mouth” (Deut. 23:23). It seems that here the word is relieved of the necessity of God’s presence as a male subject, delegating this presence to a surrogate, a speaker who takes God’s place in his absence.

In God’s absence, performative force is secured by the codification of convention. The speech act of making vows, for example, is described in the Bible as having a strict order: it has to be uttered loud, freely, without pressure, by the person familiar with the binding consequences. Chapter 30 of Numbers details the specific laws concerning vows, including the specification of who is, to use a Shakespearean word, “oathable” (*Timon of Athens* IV, iii). Within the speech act framework, these are the felicity conditions for the “happy” performative. Accordingly, vows can be made to both God and man: while the latter can, the former cannot be annulled, except by the specific prayers uttered one day of the year, on Yom Kippur. As ritual acts, both the vow and its annulment are tied to certain conventions. The oath or swear, having a stronger performative force than a vow, can never be taken back or broken: even though Joshua was tricked into swearing by the Gibeonites, his oath was still binding.

Blessing and curse are overwhelmingly important performative acts, whether God blesses man (Gen. 1:28), God blesses the Sabbath (Gen. 2: 3), God blesses his allies (Gen. 22: 17), or man blesses God, as Moses does in his Song (Ex. 15: 1–18), Deborah in hers (Judg. 5: 2–31), or David in Psalm 30. But not just anyone can make a forceful blessing; this is why, for example, Balak calls Balaam to curse the Jews: “for I know that he whom you bless *is* blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed” (Num. 22: 6). However, a curse cannot have force if it is uttered against God’s will: “How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? And how shall I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced?” asks Balaam (Num. 23: 8).

As a performative act, the Biblical or Kohanite blessing proceeds according to its strict constitutive rules too. Similarly, the engagement and wedding blessing must follow an old ritual order. In both cases, the object of the blessing is not man but God, as in the case of the table blessing too: “When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which he has given you” (Deut. 8: 10).

Rites calling for direct divine intervention form a particular case of performative-constative interaction: by the performative force of the utterance, they test, as it were, the truthfulness of the person against whom divine judgment is conditionally directed. In the divine judgment of jealousy, for example, the priest

utters a curse, which will only take effect if the woman indeed committed adultery: “if you have gone astray *while* under your husband’s *authority*, . . . the LORD make you a curse and an oath among your people, when the LORD makes your thigh rot and your belly swell” (Num. 5: 21). Comparable is the case of the mock burial ceremony introduced around the 9th century: the evocation of death serves as a deterrent to those who might have sworn falsely, and who deserve all retribution and curse (Lev. 26: 21–45, Deut. 28: 15–68).

The New Testament is similarly rich in instances of performativity. To take the most conspicuous example, Jesus Christ is considered Word Made Flesh, who came into the world as God’s son and emissary. Not only is he healing people with the perlocutionary power of his word (“Your faith has made you well” [Matthew 9:22; Mark 10:52; Luke 8:48, 18:42]), but is ultimately getting resurrected as the Son of God.

In a reading framed by speech act theory, at least three points can be made in connection with Christ’s performative powers: these concern (i) paternity (of both the word and Christ), (ii) delegation, absence, and iteration, and (iii) the undecidability between the constative and the performative. One, by declaring Christ to be the Son of God and Word Made Flesh, the fathering origin of the *logos* is evoked in these texts. Christ as the *logos* connects the world of God with the human world, as well as things seen and unseen. This is the reason why Christ speaks in parables: he is the “basis of the correspondence,” Hillis Miller observes, “within the realm of language, . . . the correspondence between his realistic narrative of sowing, fishing, or household care and those unseeable things of which the parable ‘really’ speaks” (*Tropes, Parables* 137). Two, with the insertion of Christ between God and his Word, God’s originary self-presence gets to be removed several steps further. Not only will God’s power be transferred to Christ, but God’s *logos* will be transferred to Christ as the *logos*. Christ will speak in parables, a genre *par excellence* of transference, combining, as Mark Turner claims, the element of story with projection (*Literary Mind* 5). The words of God are represented by the words of Jesus, whose parables project one story to another, contain their meanings in embedded forms. Moreover, Jesus will delegate at least some of his power to the disciples and, after the death of the disciples, when the Church is capable of providing the institutional context for meaningful iteration, to the priests. Three, in the process of building an institution, the early Christian Church starts to emphasize the historical accuracy—or constativity—of the Gospels, thereby launching, as Douglas Robinson observes, a “strong move away from the *power* of words, toward the *truth* of words” (*Performative* 33). While the parables of Jesus are performative rather than constative in the sense that they, Hillis Miller points out, “not so much passively name something as make something happen” (139), the Gospels claim to be accurate records of the words and deeds of Christ.

In all these examples one can observe a rupture between radical presence and radical absence, uniqueness and mimicability, the fulfillment of authority and the satisfaction of convention. The originary performative establishes a relation of future anterior temporality with its repetitions: while the radical act of the founding moment invents its own tradition within which it is meaningful, God's original words are the repetition of an established formula retroactively assigned to the originary moment. As a consequence of this, the originality and firstness of the originary performative will be destabilized, with the successfully iterated performative—which, Derrida insists, adheres to a “general citationality” and “conform[s] with an iterable model” (*Limited* 17, 18)—overruling the distinction between original and derivative, or primary and secondary moment. Indeed, in speech acts, which form but a subset of Derridian “writing,” there can be no first or “original” moment motored by a single person's crafting and presence, the “present intention” of a “consciousness as the ultimate authority” (“Signature” 181; emphasis in original). There is, Derrida continues,

no such thing as a code—organon of iterability—which could be structurally secret. The possibility of repeating and thus identifying the marks is implicit in every code, making it into a network [*une grille*] that is communicable, transmittable, decipherable, iterable for a third, and hence for every possible user in general. (“Signature” 180)

The performative force of the succeeding utterances, as well as their readability, therefore, depends on repetition and, concomitantly, absence—or, to use Derrida's familial imagery, an iterative structure “orphaned and separated at birth from this assistance of its father” (“Signature” 181). And the caveat here: this negative description (of the iterative structure orphaned at birth) applies, indirectly, to one moment, when the Father's ultimate presence and absolute authority bring about a code, as yet a “secret cipher” (“Signature” 180), and offer it to his sons for iteration—and, I would add: offers the subsequent repetitions *as* his sons *in* iteration—an iteration always evoking (but never attaining) “the pure singularity of the event” (191). Never again does the speech act posit the logocentric presence of the Father of the *logos*; in later instances, as we have seen, God might be evoked, called upon, as well as represented in some way, through a chain of perpetual deferral. His mark will be endowed with the possibility, as Hillis Miller puts it, “of every mark to be repeated and still to function as a meaningful mark in new contexts that are cut off entirely from the original context, the ‘intention to communicate’ of the original maker of the mark” (*Speech Acts* 78).

### A performative genre *par excellence*: the declaration and the manifesto

In the next section I will discuss declarations and manifestos as further instances of strong performativity, where the word is used to produce a new reality. In terms of the commitment and responsibility involved, declarations and manifestos have the strongest force. These acts satisfy the description of Austin's exercitives ("a decision that something is to be so" [qtd. in McCawley 32]), James D. McCawley's operatives ("in which the speaker makes something the case by saying that it is to be the case" [17]), and, above all, Searle's declarations in that they make the propositional content and reality correspond ("Classification" 37).

In Searle's general theory of speech acts, declarations are different from his other categories, assertives, directives, commissives, and expressives, in that here "saying makes it so" (*Expression* 16) and that here "we bring about changes through our utterances" (29). As such, declarations are paradigm illocutionary acts in that when they are successfully performed, a change in the world occurs. Indeed, by asserting, promising, stating, or ordering, the state of affairs contained in the propositional content of the illocutionary act will not come about. That is why Shakespeare, in *Timon of Athens*, could split the two parts of the illocutionary act of promising friendship into making the promise and being a friend: "Promise me friendship, but perform none," says Timon to Alcibiades (IV, iii). When a government official announces, for example, no matter how very formally, that a painting is an "original Boticelli," this does not make that painting an original Boticelli. Because, to use James Loxley's witty explanation: "saying 'I promise to butter the parsnips' butters no parsnips" (51). Only in declarations will propositional content correspond with reality at the moment when it is uttered. "Declarations are alone," Loxley continues, "in producing the situation they describe, such that if I say you're fired, you're fired; if I say the meeting is adjourned, then the meeting is adjourned" (51). Moreover, a promise connects in time two situations that are otherwise apart from each other: the moment of promising and the moment of fulfilling a promise. This is the "irreducibly temporal aspect [of] the promise: it looks forward to its own felicity" (99). Elie Wiesel's novel *The Oath* exploits this temporal gap between promising and fulfilling that promise when the protagonist's oath, made as a child with all members of the community that whoever would survive the pogrom will forever bury the secret of its story, is overwritten by a more powerful impulse, one he recognizes as an adult: that if by telling he could save a young life, then he must tell the world about it, even if he will thereby break his original oath. (He comes to this recognition after realizing, much like Timon, that he actually promised not keep the promise.) Only in declarations are these two moments coincidental, bringing about a correspondence between propositional content and reality. "Declarations," Searle argues, "bring about some alternation in the status or condition of the referred to object or objects solely by virtue of the fact that the declaration

has been successfully performed” (“Classification” 37). They are a special case of illocutionary acts in that they have two illocutionary points: they get the words to match the world and get the world to match the words. Searle calls this consequence of illocutionary point “direction of fit,” the difference that “determines how that content is supposed to relate to the world” (29). In declaratives, then, this direction of fit is simultaneously both “words-to-world” and “world-to-words” (38). On the one hand, they successfully manage to get language match the world and, on the other, they get the world match the language.

The Declaration of Independence (1776) is one of the greatest political documents of all times, brilliantly exploiting the strong performativity of this mode of writing. An expression of Enlightenment logic, it argues along the lines of a simple syllogism: people have the right to throw off despotic governments (major premise); the British King has established absolute tyranny over the colonies (minor premise); therefore, the people of these colonies have the right and do now throw off British rule and declare independence from England (conclusion):

We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States, that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. (Jefferson 449)

Addressing both the Americans and the British from a revolutionary speaking position, it applies directness and clarity as a rhetorical mode suited to convey “self-evident” truths and compassionate principle. Implicitly drawing an equation between act and speech act, the text enumerates the grievances in the forms of speech acts primarily (the King has *refuted, refused, forbidden, called together, dissolved, suspended, declared, abdicated, constrained*), lists the various responses of the colonies in the form of speech acts too (*warned, reminded, appealed, conjured*), following the lead of this argument to pronounce the sentence on the King: that he is “unfit to be the ruler of a free people” (449). Listing the grievances and articulating opinion about the tyrant reflects a very important moment of empowerment by the word in the history of a nation: when the oppressed gives voice to oppression and takes action as a free agent. Placing the act of declaration in the cultural context of the Enlightenment, where injustices and tyranny empower the people to take action, the acts of the colonies are presented as necessary, mandated by the “Laws of Nature” and “Nature’s

God" (447), while the ideals of equality and freedom are taken for granted and presumed to be "self-evident" (447).

Indeed, it is a text peppered with performatives; as a declaration, it was produced in order to perform certain political-historical acts. To make such statements in appropriate circumstances is to do something, to perform acts and, not incidentally, to found a political body, the free state of the United States. Among the acts performed are the confirmation of certain basic values (the text very strongly appeals to shared sentiments), the giving of "facts" (accusing England by naming, labeling, and interpreting their actions), and the declaring of separation from England. In terms of its intentional structure, it successfully accomplishes the mission it promises to accomplish. As a strong performative it raises the issue of agency as well: speakers of such utterances emerge as agents, whose actions are capable of bringing about changes in the world. It is quite revealing that by evoking the image of the grown son, agency appears as not only gendered, belonging to men, but also as racialized, since the option of standing up against the tyrannical father—or, indeed, as simply having a father to quarrel with—was available to whites only.

The Declaration of Independence is not only a marvelous example of strong performativity, but also a classroom case for the self-referentiality of the performative: that it indeed refers to a reality that it produces. What is even more important in this particular case, it showcases the way the act constitutes the actor: the "We" of the American people. What Benveniste pointed out in his "Subjectivity in Language," published as early as 1959, in connection with performatives in general—namely that "the verb establishes the act at the same time that it sets up the subject" (732)—holds especially true here: the act brings about the actor. Indeed, the paradox of the speech act lies in the fact that the entity declaring itself "American People" did not yet exist when independence was declared in their name ("in the name and by the Authority of the good people"). The signers, Derrida remarks, do not exist prior to the signing.

They do *not* exist as an entity, the entity does *not* exist *before* this declaration, not as *such*. If it gives birth to itself, as free and independent subject, as possible signer, this can hold only in the act of signature. The signature invents the signer. (*Negotiations* 49)

Although the signatories claimed to act in their name, the "united States of America," the "General Congress," or the "free and independent states" did not exist either. In this felicitous speech act, the "We" of the "American people," as well as the United States as "free and independent states" were really constituted simultaneously with the issuing of the declaration; independence could be achieved because the entity "the American people" was produced. "It was," Sandy Petrey insists, "through speaking in the name of the American people that the delegates produced a people to name; it was by invoking an authority that they established an authority to invoke" (159).

The power of the document lies in the fact that the delegates produced the “We” of the American people by pledging to each other (as opposed to pledging to the Crown), yet managed to retain their allegiance to God. Actually, the text evokes the authority of God to validate the speech act: it is by His ultimate authority (as Nature’s God) that performative language claims entitlement for the people. God, who is (once again) performatively produced by being named and being assigned ultimate authority, now authorizes the claim of entitlement to the signers as representatives of the American people.

As such, The Declaration of Independence vindicates the right to self-empowerment, where the performative act derives, as Péter Dávidházi has convincingly argued in another context, with regards to Jonathan Swift’s tombstone inscription, from the etymology of the verb *vindicate*—*vim dicere*, to claim power (*Menj, vándor* 106). Vindication, therefore, is a performative expressly discursive, visibly limited to the realm of language, imitating and iterating the Ur-performative vindication of God, who, by claiming the power to create, called the world into being.

In this reading of the Declaration, then, the signature indeed invents the signer. Because it is a strong performative declaration, the signature is maintained within the founding act itself, fully engaging or producing the signer in the process. If anything, it is this special status of the signer that sets the performative apart from the constative. Because in another sense, to which I will return a little later, the difference between a constative and a performative structure is very difficult to grasp here.

Derrida raises another issue, that of delegated representation. In a triple gesture of deferred authority, the signature stands for the signers—attesting to their absence rather than presence, as Jonathan Culler points out (*On Deconstruction* 125)—who claim to represent the people (the “good people,” which, we know from history, did not include women or blacks), behind whom there is the ultimate authority, therefore the ultimate signer and guarantor of the “Laws of Nature.” So it is really God as a “last instance” to whom authority is deferred by the people, their representatives, and then their signatures. “God is the name—the best one—for this last instance and this ultimate signature . . . God is the best proper name,” Derrida says, adding, however, that in point of fact Thomas Jefferson considered himself to be the sole signatory, replacing God as the founder of the new nation (*Negotiations* 52).

From a common sense perspective, however, it is difficult to accept the claim that the performative process of signing (a declaration of independence) is in itself sufficient to produce the signer (the independent nation). What about unsuccessful revolutions, why couldn’t they produce free nations by saying so (or signing so) in comparably worded declarations?

The Seneca Declaration of Women or Seneca Falls Declaration (1848) was modeled on The Declaration of Independence in a way similar to how Olympe de

Gouges's Declaration of the Rights of Woman (1791) was modeled on the new French constitution's Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789). The Seneca document follows the same logic as its revolutionary pretext: it too appealed to "self-evident" truths ("We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal" [Stanton 438]); it too listed the grievances, which this time women have suffered from men. This text also exploits the force of performatives, whereby women claimed agency. Moreover, the iterative structure of the Seneca Falls Declaration seems to accomplish a particular political purpose: it shows some of the fundamental discrepancies of the original document. Rhetorically, the iterative form served to highlight the fact that certain individuals (among them, women and blacks) were excluded from the group called nation, and that the document beautifully crafting the Enlightenment values of a nation does not allow some of the oppressed to rise against the oppressor (on the discrepancies, see Kerber, "Can a Woman"). By virtue of the iterative form, rational thinking was shown to be appropriated by white men, thereby the "rational" drafters were stripped of their prerogative as "rational" thinkers. (Of course, African Americans could follow a similar line of argument, since the document does not speak of or for blacks.)

From a speech act point of view, The Seneca Falls Declaration was infelicitous as a speech act because it was unable either to invent American women as a legal entity or to achieve what they stated in the propositional content of their Declaration: independence from and equality with men. Had they been able to retroactively produce themselves as subjects equal to men, their speech act would have been felicitous, their struggle successful. In their case, the referent failed to produce the sign (of women as a legal entity); therefore, reference ceased to hold.

To return to The Declaration of Independence, the felicity of the performative seems to depend on the existence of the "free people" who sign the document; moreover, history must retroactively validate the performative, the act of declaration by such no small matter as winning the War of Independence. So we have a particular temporalization of the future-anterior kind, here projecting the consequence of a future event (the successful revolution) back into the past as a precondition to the felicity of the speech act (that the signatories are a legal entity entitled to claim independence). The drafters of the Declaration presume the felicitousness of their speech act (of declaration as well as of the Declaration) by taking for granted that which is just being performed: the American people, the American people successfully winning independence. "The felicity of this speech act," Hillis Miller observes, "depends on presuming the priority of that which it posits or creates" (*Speech Acts* 124). There is a strong element of constativity, or constative-performative undecidability, in such speech acts: they often mask themselves as constatives, affirming constatively a state of affairs that is just being brought about performatively.

Indeed, the dilemma here is, in speech act terms, whether the Declaration is a constative or a performative act. Historians are not in agreement; some argue for the former, saying that the American Revolution really confirmed existing social and political realities (see Nelson, “The Revolutionary Character”). This claim seems to be supported by John Adams too, who, in his letter to Jefferson, insisted that “The Revolution was in the Minds of the People, and this was effected, from 1760 to 1775, in the course of fifteen Years before a drop of blood was drawn at Lexington” (Capon 455). Therefore, what we read as a performative, a declarative, earlier is really a constative. As Derrida puts it,

One cannot decide . . . whether independence is stated or produced by this utterance. . . . Is it that the good people have already freed themselves in fact and are only stating the fact of this emancipation in [*par*] the Declaration? Or is it rather that they free themselves at the instant of and by [*par*] the signature of this Declaration? (49)

So the text cannot escape the aporia between stating and declaring, the constative or the performative. But it is exactly this undecidability, according to Derrida, “between a performative structure and a constative structure that is *required* to produce the sought-after effect” (49; emphasis in original).

Already Austin accepted the possibility of such undecidability between constative and performative utterances. “Very commonly the *same* sentence is used on different occasions of utterance in *both* ways, performative and constative,” he claims, adding, “[t]he thing seems hopeless from the start” (*How to Do* 67). This is especially the case in revolutionary situations and other radical acts, which create—by what Derrida terms as “fabulous retroactivity” (50) and Hillis Miller as a “metaleptic future anterior” (*Speech Acts* 27)—the grounds that retroactively justify them. In such revolutionary or radical instances, the conventions that authorize the performative are actually just being made, and the agency or authority out of which the signatory or utterer acts is just being assigned to this signatory or utterer. This happens in (successful) political declarations or in texts of entitlement, assigning subjectivity to those who were earlier only constructed as objects, for example. Very often these performatives are masked as constatives, giving the illusion of some pre-existing reference which is only being created during the process. This is a technique not unknown in political propaganda and media manipulation, when a purportedly “objective” state of affairs is introduced through a constative, when actually that state of affairs is just being produced performatively.

Manifestos, whether political or artistic, form a subset of declarations, to which all the features listed in connection with declarations apply. Like declarations, they too make a change in reality solely by saying so, produce the situation they describe, and establish a correspondence between propositional content and reality. Also, they manage to get both language to match the world and

the world to match the language. Here too, the act produces the actor; the signer is fully engaged—is fully produced—in the act of signing. Similarly to other declarations, the manifesto becomes a felicitous speech act if future-anterior temporalization successfully projects the consequence of a future event back into the past. As such, manifestos exhibit a clear constative-performative undecidability in that they are masked as constatives affirming a state of affairs that is just being brought about. Finally, manifestos are iterable structures that reproduce, always in a radical and provocative manner, the originary performative of word as *logos*.

One of the special features of manifestos, which mark them within the larger set of declarations, corresponds to their iterability. As self-renewing performative acts, not only do they reproduce the originary performative, but also that initial gesture of declaring a position that goes against the accepted or the mainstream. Manifestos will always exhibit a revolutionary and combative nature in that they discursively participate in the struggle fought against power and hegemony. The well-known phrasing of *The Communist Manifesto* will return in the 1909 *Suffragette Manifesto*, the 1912 *Manifesto of the Futurist Woman*, or Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth (Les Damnés de la terre)* as late as 1961. The manifesto proclaims difference, dissent, and a standing up against oppression. It speaks with self-assurance, in a voice of intransigence, as one, probably a mouth-piece of some higher power, in possession of some ultimate truth. As Janet Lyon points out, this is a direct, passionate voice, framing "its declarations with assurances of unobstructed rhetorical clarity" (14) and forcefully enumerating grievances "which cast a group's oppression as a struggle between the empowered and the disempowered" (15). Often these will be radical and innovative texts, written by "revolutionary artisans," who "mark the artistic praxis that will *create [a] new world*" (16).

Here too, the "We" of the manifesto is being performatively created by the declaration and the signing. The signatories either demand to be wholly separate from mainstream (as the "We" of Marinetti's *Manifesto of Futurism* of 1909, Apollinaire's *The Cubist Painters* of 1913, Kandinsky's expressionist manifesto entitled *The Problem of Form* from 1912, the *Manifesto of Vorticism* of 1914, signed by eleven artists), or they call upon their addressees, in a vocative form, to identify with their cause (as, for example, Mina Loy's *Feminist Manifesto* from 1914), or even use the first person singular to show up individual dissent to be followed (as for example Tzara's *Dada Manifesto* of 1918). In either case, the issue of agency is foregrounded, when the disempowered take initiative and act as agents in their history. Some manifestos are overtly performative, demonstrably iterating the words of political declarations. Such is, for example, the "Proclamation" of Eugene Jolas of 1929, issued in the avant-garde magazine *transition* (*sic.*):

[W]e hereby declare that

1. THE REVOLUTION IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IS AN ACCOMPLISHED FACT.
2. THE IMAGINATION IN SEARCH OF A FABULOUS WORLD IS AUTONOMOUS AND UNCONFINED.
- .....
6. THE LITERARY CREATOR HAS THE RIGHT TO DISINTEGRATE THE PRIMAL MATTER OF WORDS IMPOSED ON HIM BY TEXT-BOOKS AND DICTIONARIES.
7. HE HAS THE RIGHT TO USE WORDS OF HIS OWN FASHIONING AND TO DISREGARD EXISTING GRAMMATICAL AND SYNTACTICAL LAWS. (Kolocotroni 313)

This manifesto clearly reiterates the tone and even demands of political declarations, replacing the idea of revolt against social and political oppression with the idea of rising up against the oppression of academic English, the tyranny of “text-books and dictionaries,” and linguistic rules codified by grammarians.

### Word power

**(Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; Norman Mailer, ‘The Time of Her Time’)**

In this chapter I discuss briefly the wounding power of language, commonly known as hate speech or verbal assault, and its positive counterpart, empowerment through language, through three examples of strong performativity: Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Norman Mailer’s “The Time of Her Time.”

Words that hurt have locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary force in the sense that they are uttered, acted out, and have lasting consequential effects. A curse, for example, is not only said (locution) and put on someone (illocution), but will perform an injury upon the person as an object: that person will remain under or in the bind of the curse, left with a lasting wound (perlocution). To use the constative-performative distinction, verbal aggression pretends to be a constative in that it purports to assert the truth of a particular state of affairs, but its purpose is to actually bring about that state of affairs: to make the assertion come true. It is in this sense that, as Judith Butler claims, hate speech does not only “communicate an offensive idea” but also enacts the message it communicates (*Excitable* 72). Much like pornography, hate speech is both representation and enactment: racist labels and stereotypes, for example, convey the message of how members of that race are perceived by the dominant group, while also contribute to the subordination of that group. “It is, in the very speaking of such speech, the performance of injury itself, where the injury is understood as social subordination” (18). This social subordination comes about in a process similar to that captured by Louis Althusser’s concept of interpellation: here too the addressee is “called” by some powerful ideology expressed by the offensive words;

therefore, the addressee will be produced as a subordinated and degraded object (*Lenin* 160, 182). Indeed, as performative, linguistic injury is not just language but act too, one that is performed by oppressors in order to constitute their linguistically vulnerable targets as subjected victims. Only by standing up against such injury—as Janie does in *Their Eyes*—can the power of the word be turned around and used as a means of self-empowerment, making a subject out of the formerly subjected victim.

### **When words hurt: Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn***

The well-known controversies surrounding *The Adventures of Huckleberry* today result from the way African Americans are discursively constructed in the text, which construction has proved to be offensive to generations of readers. In the memorable dialogue between Huck and Aunt Sally, for example, where Huck invents the story about a steamboat explosion, he tells the woman that nobody got hurt, the accident only “killed a nigger.” To which she replies, “Well, it’s lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt” (208). No matter how one might admire Twain’s irony, the point here is, of course, that the source of humor is whether blacks are to be taken as human beings or not.

The word *nigger* is always used when Jim’s objecthood is emphasized: in these instances he is “Miss Watson’s big nigger” (35), a “runaway nigger” (76), a “good nigger” (“He was a mighty good nigger, Jim was” [155]) or one who “ain’t a bad nigger” (259), or simply “my nigger,” “our nigger,” “your nigger” (204). Moreover, as “nigger Jim” he is placed in a narrative that foregrounds some social and historical aspects of slavery: the African American as property, one belonging to some white person, young or old; the African American whose conduct is evaluated by whites; or the slave whose only hope is to run North, to become fugitive, escaping from slave territories.

In the stereotyping of the figure of the African American, certain features of Jim are overcommunicated in both the verbal narrative and the pictorial narrative of Kemble’s famous illustrations (which Twain is known to have agreed to). In both narratives Jim is portrayed as an ignorant, superstitious, childlike person, who has no self-respect and should not be taken very seriously. All through the novel he acts as a plaything to Huck—and seems even to accept the lowest position offered to him: goes along with it, playing the expected role of the dumb Negro. He allows Huck to construct him into the man over whom the boy has full control: he does not stand up against this stereotyping and subordination. For example, for some unexplainable reason he does not question Huck’s decision to continue drifting down the Mississippi further and further into slave territories, instead of crossing the river earlier to reach Illinois. But, as Jane Smiley points

out, “Jim is never autonomous, never has a vote, always finds his purposes subordinate to Huck’s, and, like every good sidekick, he never minds” (63).

Readers have long been offended by the oppressive language of the book, especially the aggressive use of the pejorative term *nigger*, which has evoked the memories of centuries of oppression and humiliation. Critics such as Peaches Henry argue that the word *nigger* will trigger a Pavlovian reflex for many black readers, since it not only reminds them of slavery but “encapsulates the decades of oppression that followed emancipation” (366). No matter how much things might have changed, no matter how much blacks too know that the word *nigger* was part of another historical era, it will still wound the addressee or reader. As Langston Hughes puts it,

The word *nigger* to colored people of high and low degree is like a red rag to a bull. Used rightly or wrongly, ironically or seriously, of necessity for the sake of realism, it doesn’t matter. Negroes do not like it in any book or play whatsoever, be the book or play ever so sympathetic in its treatment of the basic problems of the race. Even though the book or play is written by a Negro, they still do not like it. (268–269)

From a speech act perspective it is very hard indeed to dismiss the problematic nature of racial stereotyping in the novel. For references to blacks as sub-human, the stereotypical portrayal of Jim (as a plaything or a sidekick), and the word *nigger* each perform illocutionary and perlocutionary acts in degrading and humiliating African Americans, evoking historical memories of slavery, and perpetuating racial stereotypes. While wounding the object such words are directed against, it is supposedly empowering the utterer in that its speech act force presupposes the speaking position of authority and power. While it is highly debatable whether such verbal aggression really empowers the dominant group (which needs no empowerment, being in the position of power anyway), insult is added to injury only when arguments concerning the historical context—perceptions taken for granted in the 1870s and 1880s, when the novel was written—and Twain’s otherwise well-known decency are cited. Can it excuse Mark Twain that he just went along with what was taken for granted in his time? That his assumptions were left unexamined? Shouldn’t every society be held accountable for the values it takes for granted? The fact that—unlike the word *queer*, for example, which was appropriated by gay activists and theories—the word *nigger* was never stripped of its original context of insult (by African American activists and theorists, for example): it was never put through the process of resignification, repeated differently, in a subversive manner.

**When words empower:  
Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God***

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* celebrates the black woman who found her voice and self—through the wounding power of the word and through being empowered by the word. In fact, Janie's triumphant journey to freedom and selfhood is twofold: from being seen to seeing and from being spoken to, to speaking. Actually, this route is even more complex: considering the historical context, the former leads from invisibility through being seen to seeing, while the latter, in Janie's case, takes her from being spoken to speaking to remaining silent again.

On the first pages of the novel Janie appears as a spectacle, a beautiful woman who is the object of everyone's attention—to the degree that “[t]he porch couldn't talk for looking” (2).

The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt. . . . nobody moved, nobody spoke, nobody even thought to swallow spit until after the gate slammed behind her. (2)

Although objectified as spectacle, being seen already represents a major step for the African American. Moreover, she is looked at by her fellow African Americans, granting them, at least, some degree of empowerment.

Hurston brings together the verbal and the visual in what can be considered the climax of the novel, the porch scene, where Janie stands up against the man who tries to put her down constantly. Responding to her second husband's verbal abuse targeting her body and supposedly fading womanhood, she says:

Naw, Ah ain't no young gal no mo' but den Ah ain't no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh whole lot more'n *you* kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothing to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout *me* looki' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life. (75)

Janie finds her voice, the cultural tool of mastery for the African American especially (see Frantz Fanon, *Black* 38), thereby constituting her female subjectivity outside the realm of oppression. She responds to Joe's verbal aggression by a comparable, albeit—because from a member of a traditionally abused class—much more powerful, verbal aggression: her words annul his domination, and will ultimately kill the man publicly wounded in his pride and manhood. Janie takes control both verbally and visually here: appropriating the power of the word to herself, she speaks up while at the same time she makes a spectacle out of Joe. Now it is the man to whom everyone's attention is turned:

Joe must submit to being spectacularized. Having “robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish . . . she cast down his empty armor before men and they had laughed, would keep on laughing” (75). Voice and vision, hearing and seeing go hand in hand, as are explicitly connected in the sentence of Walter: “You heard her, you ain’t blind.” Not only does Janie the spectacle become the spectator, but also the one in control of the spectacle: her voice directs the gaze of everyone on the porch to Joe, much like a film director controls the movement of the camera. “Responding to the long history of blacks as spectacle,” Deborah Clarke points out, “she offers the possibility of reclaiming the visual as a means of black expression and black power” (600). Janie’s use of the wounding power of language seems, however, to be restricted to situations where she is the colonized object. When she is put down, she will fight back, that is. But now that she is empowered—aware of her verbal power to control the visual scene—Janie will remain silent at crucial points of the novel, such as the final court scene. Having found her self through voice, she can now afford to refuse to speak too. Because she will not abuse the authority presupposed in the felicitous speech act.

**When words hurt and empower:  
Norman Mailer, “The Time of Her Time”**

Norman Mailer’s “The Time of Her Time” offers another example for the wounding power of speech. Written at the time when sexual liberation supposedly included women too, it was interpreted as a breakthrough text for its presentation of female orgasm. Today, however, it is more read (or not read) for giving a record of mid-century male sexual violence. Here the male protagonist, the Irishman Sergius O’Shaughnessy, who teaches bull-fighting in Manhattan and describes himself as “the messiah of the one-night stand” (447), is having sex with Denise, a young Jewish college student, who has not experienced orgasm before. Her orgasm becomes a matter of prestige to him, her sexuality a battle-field where he has to win by exercising his power. As a last resort he penetrates from behind and utters “You dirty little Jew” (464). The physical act and the words have their perlocutionary force: they shock the woman into orgasm. The injurious words of this “messiah”—a “redeemer damned,” to apply Zoltán Abádi-Nagy’s succinct phrase introduced to describe some sixties protagonists (*Válság és komikum* 247ff)—open her sexual floodgates, helping her, as it were, to re-experience the traumas, probably suffered both as a Jew and as a woman, which previously blocked her experience of *jouissance*. “You dirty little Jew” becomes both therapy and trauma: on the one hand she is “cured,” on the other, this hate speech (and the anal penetration it served to amplify) could be a new trauma, only strengthening her social constitution as a woman, a Jewish woman, in a subordinate position both for her ethnicity and gender.

His performance is both perlocutionary and illocutionary: it traumatizes her (perlocution) and puts her into a subordinate class (illocution). Denise's traumatization and constitution into an inferior person follows the lines along which, as Catharine MacKinnon has convincingly demonstrated, pornography works: construed as a proper speech act with both perlocutionary and illocutionary force, it acts on women in injurious ways and constitutes them as a class of inferior beings "objectified and presented dehumanized as sexual objects or things for use" (*Only Words* 22–23). Denise, however, refuses to be victimized: she actually speaks back, jolting him out of his complacency as a "phallic narcissist." Citing a mutual friend, she says to him, "your whole life is a lie, and you do nothing but run away from the homosexual that is you" (465). Empowered by language, she unconstructs herself as a woman subjected to male sexual control, and reconstructs herself as a sexual subject on her own right. Moreover, her calling him a man running away from the homosexual within, she beats him, ultimately, at his own show of male heterosexual supremacy.

**Alternative realities as performative creations**  
**(Mark Twain, *The Mysterious Stranger*;**  
**Ambrose Bierce, 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge')**

In the following I will discuss another kind of strong performative constructions, where alternative realities are created solely by the power of the word. I will use two texts, Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger* and Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," to argue that the real and the made, fictioned, or imagined are intertwined and undistinguishable because both are performative constructs. For this reason, boundaries are crossed and recrossed with similar ease in both texts, allowing for an ontological instability that makes these late 19th century-early 20th century texts very modern.

**Performing cultural subjunctivity:**  
**Mark Twain, *The Mysterious Stranger***

Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger* is a virtuoso performance of boundary crossings; the characters move easily between worlds, events, and people, created or brought about purely by the power of will and word. While the author takes great pains to first construct a world where people, events, purposes, and ideas form Manichean pairs of good and bad, natural and supernatural, soon enough it will be impossible to tell good people, causes, or turns of events from bad. Moreover, the natural and the supernatural will melt into each other and strong performativity—here the creative power of the word—will cancel the difference

between reality and imagination. At first the real and the fictive are positioned as polar opposites, making the transfer from one to the other through a metalepsis, defined by Gérard Genette as “[t]he transition from one narrative level to another” (234), where the boundary crossed is “the frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells [and] the world of which one tells” (236). Indeed, the story “jumps from one voice-level to another,” as *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines metalepsis (Preminger and Brogan 760), but this seeming metalepsis will turn out to be intextuality: the shift between two textual worlds. As a particular case of intertextuality, both worlds prove to be fictional and textual; thus the metaleptic leap which the boys believe they can take will be no more than an intertextual leap from one to another fictional world. Ultimately, reality loses its ontological grounding: it turns out that it is this physical world that does not exist, rather has been swallowed by or collapsed into the constructed-performed world of dream and imagination.

Before proceeding with my reading of the performative aspects of the text, a few words about the manuscript are necessary. We cannot talk about a single authoritative text; the earlier edition brought out posthumously by Albert Bigelow Paine and Frederick A. Duneka in 1916 has been considered an editorial fraud since William M. Gibson located and published in 1969 Twain’s three handwritten manuscripts that make up the collection *The Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts*. The first manuscript, entitled “The Chronicle of Young Satan,” expounds the story of the encounter of three young boys with Satan, an angel. Although several of the key events take place, the 423 page long text ends mid-chapter, leaving the story unfinished. The second manuscript, “Schoolhouse Hill,” also called the Hannibal version, a fragment of some 80 pages, recounts the adventures of the same young man with Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn in St. Petersburg. The third of these manuscripts, entitled “No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger,” has been considered the most complete version, where the text Twain worked on during the last years of his life was rounded off by the contents of a manuscript that has survived separately under Twain’s title, “Conclusion to the Book.” It is in this conclusion that the author gives the last twist to his story, whereby, as I will demonstrate, reality gets folded into dream and is shown to be performatively constructed. (For more details on philological history, see William M. Gibson’s “Introduction.”)

Set in Austria 1702 and narrated by the young boy Theodor Fischer, “The Chronicle of Young Satan” recounts the adventures and miracles, as well as trials, of the mysterious visit of the angel called Satan. Set similarly in Austria, but in 1490, the narrator of “No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger” is the sixteen year old printer’s apprentice, August Feldner, who is befriended by an enigmatic young man called “Number 44, New Series 864,962.” Angelic and satanic, an innocent adolescent and a ruthless vagabond, exponent of social determinism and an inveterate fatalist, showman and trickster, tamer of beasts and manipulator of humans, savor to some but murderer of others, dreamer and creator, the

mysterious stranger is a recurring figure in Twain's fiction, found also, as Derek Parker Royal has shown, in *The Innocents Abroad, Roughing It, Life on the Mississippi, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, and Pudd'nhead Wilson*. The protagonist of *The Mysterious Stranger* exhibits similarities to Hank Morgan of *A Connecticut Yankee* and David Wilson of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* especially in that they are all performers, "revealers of truths that expose societal shams, individual hypocrisy, and illegitimate sources of power," and are all able "to make life-and-death decisions" through possessing "a fatal and even apocalyptic power"(47).

Satan/Forty-four (sometimes referred to as 44) becomes the companion and idol of Theodor/August, provoking in the boy a passionate devotion he had not known earlier. Satan/44 is a magical phenomenon. He seems to "prove" in so many ways that where he comes from is indeed that other world, best understood as a duplicate of this one. He tells about life in heaven in very human terms when, for example, he describes the nursery he grew up in together with the other angels. Satan/Forty-four gives a dramatic performance of his supernatural powers when, in order to convince the boys about the true nature of the human race, he sets up his "theatre" (137) where he shows them—"with a thought" (134)—what has happened since the Garden of Eden. "To kill," he says, "being the chiefest ambition of the human race and the earliest incident in its history, but only the Christian Civilization has scored a triumph to be proud of" (137). He turns lives around, but usually not for what the boys would consider the better. He makes old Wilhelm "happy" by taking his sanity away ("No sane man can be happy, for him life is real, and he sees what a fearful thing it is" [164]), while at another time he changes the "life-scheme" of their friend Fischer, whereby he will live to be ninety—except now he will go to hell, not heaven (131). Most of all, he is a figure of contradictions. On the one hand, he is a Christ like figure—he evokes the youthful Jesus of Apocrypha when making clay birds come alive (see Gibson 16) or when the crowd, which demands that he be killed ("Kill him, kill him!"), is pacified by the argument, "What is the use to kill the boy. . . whatever power he has, he gets from his master" (295). On the other hand, he conveys the darkest vision possible of the pitiful, limited, trivial human race. He compares the difference between the human being and himself to the "difference between a drop of water and the sea, a rushlight and the sun, the difference between the infinitely trivial and the infinitely sublime!" (319). This difference, he insists, results from the fact that only the race he belongs to is capable of truly creating something out of nothing—out of thought. By the performative power of *logos*, that is.

With my race it is different; we have no limits of any kind, we comprehend all things. . . . A man *originates* nothing in his head, he merely observes exterior things, and *combines* them in his head—puts several observed things together and draws a conclusion. His mind is merely a machine, that is all. . . . a man's mind cannot

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*create*—a god’s can, and my race can. This is the difference. *We* need no contributed materials, we *create* them—out of thought. All things that exist were made out of thought—and out of nothing else. (331–333; emphasis in original)

Forty-four gives ample demonstrations of his creative (performative) powers to August: he reads people’s minds, controls their will, performs miracles of all kinds, becomes visible or invisible as he pleases (allows Theodor and his friends as well as August to borrow these powers for some time too), can thin out like a soap bubble and vanish, makes Duplicates to everyone in the town, gives illustrated history, psychology, and theology lessons to his friend. Some of these tricks magnetize Theodor/August, others overpower them with utter gloom. Such is, for example, the Assembly of the Dead, which August watches for hours and hours in black darkness and empty silence, “as if the world was holding its breath” (401). But what Forty-four can make, he can unmake too: “Then, all of a sudden 44 waved his hand and we stood in an empty and soundless world” (403).

Finally, he comes to say goodbye to August.

“I must go now, and we shall not see each other any more.”

“In this life, 44, but in another? We shall meet in another, surely, 44?”

Then all tranquilly and soberly he made the strange answer—

“*There is no other.*” (403)

.....  
 “*Life itself is only a vision, a dream.*”

“*Nothing* exists; all is a dream. God—man—the world—the sun, the moon, the wilderness of stars—a dream, all a dream; they have no existence. *Nothing exists save empty space—and you!*”

“And you are not you—you have no body, no blood, no bones, you are but a *thought*. I myself have no existence, I am but a dream—your dream, creature of your imagination. (403–405)

This is the solipsistic “conclusion” to the book, whereby Twain performs the double gesture of withdrawing both the certainty of this world and the promise of the other. Nothing can be taken for granted, even though both worlds were shown to and ascertained by the senses—“no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell” (405). The world built on binaries such as good vs. bad, body vs. soul, human vs. angelic, natural vs. supernatural is destabilized at its foundations, giving the ultimate conclusion that not only is that other world not a duplicate of this one, but that actually this one does not exist either: it is all a dream, made up, performed. It is impossible that God should exist too, given the fact that he so easily admitted evil among his creations:

a God who could make good children as easily as bad, yet preferred to make bad ones; who could have made every one of them happy, yet never made a single happy one; who made them prize their bitter life, yet stingily cut it short; who gave his angels eternal happiness unearned, yet required his other children to earn it; who

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gave his angels painless lives, yet cursed his other children with biting miseries and maladies of mind and body; who mouths justice and invented hell—mouths mercy and invented hell (404–405)

It is an idea Clemens, stricken by family tragedies, was toying with during his last years. This is what he wrote in a letter to his friend Reverend Joseph H. Twitchell in 1904 about how life had been looking to him:

as being NON-EXISTENT. That is, that there is *nothing*. That there is no God and no universe; that there is only empty space, and in it a lost and homeless and wandering and companionless and indestructible *Thought*. And that I am that thought. And God, and the Universe, and Time, and Life, and Death, and Joy and Sorrow and Pain only a grotesque and brutal *dream*, evolved from the frantic imagination of that insane Thought. (qtd. in Gibson 30)

Forty-four acts in the spirit of what is known in philosophy as “Moore’s paradox,” when after making a most credible reality for the boy, he withdraws his own belief in it. After the model of the paradox described by the English philosopher G. E. Moore, “The cat is on the mat but I do not believe it is” (qtd. in Loxley 36), Forty-four could be saying, “I have created a world for you, my friends, using my powers as a supernatural being, but I do not believe I have it, or that it is a world, or indeed that I am a supernatural being.” In the game of make-believe he first suspends the “as if” of imagination, only to more shockingly reimpose it in the conclusion of the story. With this gesture of Forty-four, Mark Twain recalls the waving and then breaking of the wand of another grand magician, Shakespeare through Prospero in *The Tempest*, saying:

Our revels are now ended. These our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and  
Are melted into air, into thin air;  
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with sleep. (IV, 1)

The revels are ended for Twain too; his actors were also all spirits, who melted into thin air. Life here too is “rounded with sleep.”

Satan/Forty-four is, then, engaged in the “as if” language game of imagining and pretending, a game, to use Victor Turner’s phrase, of the “sub-junctive mood,” concerned with “wish, desire, possibility or hypothesis” (*From Ritual* 83) Indeed, he presents a vision best captured as subjunctive cultural per-

formance that toys with the possibility of alternative worlds created by performative powers. The function of his performance, as is the function of all performances of cultural subjunctivity according to Turner, is to provide the individuals “with passage from one basic human state or status . . . to another” (“Liminality” 21). Forty-four’s liminal game of make-believe does this crossing of thresholds twice, actually: first when the border between natural and supernatural dimensions is crossed (when little people are created, for example) and second, when the reality of the real is being questioned at the end.

According to Mark Twain’s conclusion, then, the two worlds are alike in being equally dreamed, imagined, or, we could say, performatively constructed. Linguistically and philosophically, they show little difference: reference is such that language does not differentiate between the real and the imagined. Rorty’s test concerning the ability of being referred to can be performed on both the real world and the world discursively constructed from thought, language, and clay (*Consequences* 117). Although the world created by a fictional character, by Satan/Forty-four in this instance, is at least two removes away from the reader’s immediate reality, claims about all three levels can be equally “true.” The sceptic’s question posed by Rorty—“how would it be different if everything were a dream? How would it be different if it were all made up? How would it be different if there were nothing there to be represented?” (*Consequences* 129)—Mark Twain gives an answer much like Rorty: it would not be (is not) different. Truth is discursively constructed, constructed in language and by language (“truth cannot be out there” [*Contingency* 5]): “whether a sentence has sense,” Rorty claims, “*may* be dependent upon whether another sentence is true” (*Consequences* 129). In other words, truth is not validated by external reality—for, indeed, there is nothing outside the text. Only the text exists for Twain too: the creative faculty, the dream (“and you the maker of it” [405]). Hence the imperative: “Dream other dreams, and better!” (404).

While the claim that the mind makes the real is wholly familiar in the symbolist tradition, here in *The Mysterious Stranger* it is not a poetic artifact that the mind makes, but reality itself. Indeed, reality as part of the mind, or, as Hillis Miller puts it in connection with Wallace Stevens, “reality is the figment of the mind” (*Poets of Reality* 256).

**When the dying man constructs himself as a living man:  
Ambrose Bierce, “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”**

Bierce’s most popular piece, the Civil War story written in 1891, “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” presents elaborate boundary crossings between the “reality” of the fictional characters and the imagined world of the protagonist, now two removes away from what Rorty calls our “plain ordinary

spatio-temporal existence” (*Consequences* 118). Here borders between lived and imagined, outer and inner are repeatedly transgressed, while internal monologue is presented as the narration of external events. I see the piece as a special case of descriptive pause, where the object of description is purely internal. As the portrayal of a dying man’s last moments, it is also an early example of psychological realism, offering, unbeknownst to the reader until the very end, a narrative transition between life and death. In addition, it can be considered a critique of gendered and racialized cultural spheres.

An Alabama planter who is a civilian at war-time, Peyton Farquhar lives between the social spheres of of the war and women of the home; but his in-betweenness ends as he becomes feminized when approaching the home through fantasy and imagination. Moreover, his last moments are extended into an elaborate escape narrative reversing the traditional racialized roles of master and slave. Running for his life, Farquhar the Southern white planter is now put into the position of the black slave, going through the same experience as the escaping slaves. First he falls victim to the scheming of the Northern scout, later he is hunted down—if only in his imagination—by the enemy: in both cases he is made into an object, whose body is foregrounded. In between these two series of objectification and corporialization, he makes himself into a subject who takes control—if only, again, in his imagination.

Depicting his last moments while being executed by the Yankees, the narrative follows Farquhar’s imaginary escape and return home, to his wife and plantation, with moments of pain and suffering finally leading to a few idyllic moments, which abruptly end in death. The story is a feat of surnaturalism, presenting both the real of the fictional narrative and the level above this fictioned reality in naturalistic detail.

Bierce proves himself a true naturalist in his very matter-of-fact description of the scene of execution, describing the preparations and the whole machinery of war in a detached voice.

A man stood upon a railroad bridge in northern Alabama, looking down into the swift water twenty feet below. The man's hands were behind his back, the wrists bound with a cord. A rope closely encircled his neck. It was attached to a stout cross-timber above his head and the slack fell to the level of his knees. Some loose boards laid upon the sleepers supporting the metals of the railway supplied a footing for him and his executioners—two private soldiers of the Federal army, directed by a sergeant who in civil life may have been a deputy sheriff. (33)

The man “engaged in being hanged,” the corporialized patient suffering these preparations, is the object of narrative as well as visual attention; the narrative voice shows no emotions, only admits that the man did not look like a villain:

He wore a mustache and pointed beard, but no whiskers; his eyes were large and dark gray, and had a kindly expression which one would hardly have expected in one whose neck was in the hemp. Evidently this was no vulgar assassin. (34)

Interspersed with these matter-of-fact descriptions, Bierce makes matter-of-fact comments:

Death is a dignitary who when he comes announced is to be received with formal manifestations of respect, even by those most familiar with him. In the code of military etiquette silence and fixity are forms of deference. . . . The liberal military code makes provision for hanging many kinds of persons, and gentlemen are not excluded. (34)

Indeed, “military etiquette” demands that deference be given to death, even when it comes announced—as opposed to, the irony suggests, when it is unannounced, while the military’s “liberalism” consists in willing to kill all kinds of people. His conclusion that the military respects death but not the living supports his verdict on the absurdity of the war spirit.

Turning to the man to be executed, the narration ceases to focus on external events but enters the mind of the protagonist. We follow Farquhar’s gaze from his seeing position wandering “to the swirling water of the stream,” the “piece of dancing driftwood [that] caught his attention,” and finally to his thoughts fixed upon his wife and children (34). Indeed, this is where the real story begins, after the sergeant steps aside—and after the last detour giving the reader the background of how Farquhar was tricked by the Northern scout.

In section III we are finally taken inside Farquhar’s mind, and death will be portrayed as a spiritual process, a movement in time in several stages. Slowly he will gain control to set himself free and get away from the scene of execution. This construction of the “real” will make him a subject and even an agent, as he constructs himself as a “free man” or “living man.” During the first stage, sensation will appear unaccompanied by thought. Next, the power of thought is restored. Farquhar is able to give meaning to what he feels. Perception is becoming inner, registering psychological processes. This is followed by having first his vision restored and then coming into a full possession of his senses. Now, as one of the finest passages indicates, his perception is heightened.

He felt the ripples upon his face and heard their separate sounds as they struck. He looked at the forest on the bank of the stream, saw the individual trees, the leaves and the veining of each leaf—saw the very insects upon them: the locusts, the brilliant-bodied flies, the grey spiders stretching their webs from twig to twig. He noted the prismatic colors in all the dewdrops upon a million blades of grass . . . A fish slid along beneath his eyes and he heard the rush of its body parting the water. (37–38)

He notices the soldiers who, from his perspective, look grotesque. Efforts are multiplied on both sides: he sees and feels everything better as they start shooting at him. Finally, he manages to escape, thrown out of the stream by a vortex. Taking in all the physical sensations around him, and weeping in delight, he feels as if he was born again—probably into another world where a “strange, roseate light” shone through the trees “and the wind made in their branches the music of Æolian harps” (39). Now he springs to his feet, and his last moments before death follow the trajectory of an escape narrative, except here it is the white planter who is being hunted, not the slave. In addition, his desire for the home seems to act as a marker of femininity, appropriated by the man seeking refuge in the feminine sphere. In the final stage of his flight, after crossing all the possible boundaries—social, psychological, historical, as well as those of gender and race—the inner and the outer suddenly coincide as his neck is broken and he dies.

Until the very end, the reader has no idea that the narration has departed from reality and dived into the mind of the man, since the very same techniques are used for depicting the imagined than for the real. In narratological terms, the text pretends to be extradiegetic, but at the very end it turns out to be autodiegetic: we are inside the narrator’s mind, who figures as its principal character. What the reader and Farquhar himself perceive as external is only the projected external world of the character. Internal focalization coincides with external focalization, while stream-of-consciousness is presented as the chronicle of external events.

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In conclusion of this section, I would like to emphasize again the two aspects of these texts highlighted by my two approaches. First, without the surprise twist concluding both stories, both could be read as instances of strong performativity: Satan makes clay figures which then come to life, while Farquhar sets himself free by the power of his will. The poststructuralist, in this case deconstructive reading will first of all identify the subjectivity constructions: by making clay figures come to life, Satan constructs himself as creator, an extended arm of the Almighty, and by imagining his return home, Farquhar makes himself a free man. In the final twist to the Twain piece, when he admits to the boys that all this is a dream, Satan the deconstructor moves the events into mere discourse; at the same time, he constructs himself as an even more powerful creator and knower, who is capable of controlling dreams even. In the final twist added to the Bierce story, as Farquhar dies, the events are here too moved into the discourse of dream as the dying man constructs himself into a living man. Recognition is indeed shocking in both cases, and the main reason for this shock lies in the ways these authors play with performativity.

**The language games of irony and make-believe  
(Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*)**

“When language-games change, then there is a change in concepts,  
and with the concepts the meanings of words change.” (Ludwig Wittgenstein)

I continue my exploration of the strong performative with reading a play that showcases the performative understanding of language as action and a means of influence, while at the same time it openly deploys rhetorical and pragmatic processes that violate some basic rules and assumptions of communication. Laying bare the linguistic basis of dramatic acts, Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* fully exploits the speech act potential of the genre, where, as Richard Ohmann puts it, “the action rides on a train of illocutions” (83). Albee is committed to the understanding of language as a way of acting and influencing actions, while at the same time he reverses one of the general ordinary language assumptions about the cooperative basis of language. By subverting the pragmatic axiom about cooperation, the play exhibits an interaction based on un-cooperation or non-cooperation.

All the characters are involved in a complex language game. The two masters of the ceremony, George and Martha, are experienced players, who normally make up or change the rules as they go along, and show a fine ear to their modulations all along. They play different kinds of games, which could be brought under headings like games of revelation and deceit, truth and falsehood, reality and make-believe. The aim of the game in general is twofold: to create a surrogate reality—one that is in a sense “truer” than the one they live in—by hiding the obvious (what is in front of the senses) and revealing the hidden (what would never come to light otherwise). Taken together, the two cases involve the revelation-through-construction of some “truths,” with the ultimate aim of facing reality and to correct those Ibsenian “life-lies.”

To secure their goals, the players use linguistic techniques that exploit discrepancies between saying and meaning. As rhetoricians have known for centuries, there may be a gap between what is said and what is meant. American pragmatism and English ordinary language philosophy studied language use exactly from this perspective when it identified certain processes that might explain this gap between communicated and intended meaning. H. Paul Grice, for example, formulated specific classes of communicative intentions serving as the basis of his concept of conversational implicature (“Meaning,” “Logic and Conversation”). A conversational implicature is what is left implied and implicit in language use. In Grice's example, “Even Ken knows it's unethical,” the implicature is that “Ken is the least likely [of a contextually invoked set] to know it's unethical” (“Conversational Implicature”). Part of total communication, implicature acts as a bridge between what is said and what is meant. In fact, there are several other such bridges: performatives, especially the indirect kind, and

presuppositions may all be instrumental in making visible either the discrepancies or the connections between what is said and what is implied. In other words, performatives and presuppositions allow speakers to understand how saying and meaning relate to each other—and ultimately to mean what they say.

In the drama, the players have one goal with the exploitation of discrepancies between saying and meaning: to have the language games uncovered. That is why the characters are continually self-reflexive: questioning the transparency of language, they lay bare the mechanisms of this game, deploy the rhetorical and pragmatic devices openly, give high visibility to artifice. The hosts want their guests to disregard what is in front of their senses—in terms of what is transparent in language, what descriptive, constative or representational language might convey to them—but see what otherwise they wouldn't notice. They want them to realize both what they, Martha and George, did right in their lives and what they did wrong. The former is not obvious because the guests have difficulties going beyond appearances; the latter involves some secret that would never come to light had the hosts not brought it up in conversation. Martha and George want their guests to understand them as well as help them come to terms with themselves. Because, on the one hand, the public image seems to go counter with their private acts: in spite of the verbal pyrotechnics (done mostly for the sake of their audience, the other couple), theirs is a marriage based on love, trust, and acceptance; on the other hand, they want a particular private secret revealed: the child, which seems as imaginary as the pain is real.

The play is known for lacking any so-called “action”: nothing “happens” besides talking, or, put differently, everything that happens, happens via language. Conversation is the primary context, in which storytelling and dialogue occur. Since sometimes this goes on without the necessary consent of the nonspeaking participants (which consent is a conversational requirement, according to Mary Louise Pratt [*Toward a Speech Act* 105]), conversation often verges on imposition. Having met for the first time that night, the characters—new colleagues and their wives—are becoming intimate. Their through-the-looking-glass introduction has a special axis: their negative traits (such as alcoholism, lack of motivation, marrying for money, faking pregnancies) are revealed before the socially valued positive traits (such as getting an M.A. at nineteen or having been intercollegiate state middleweight champion). Nothing remains a secret; everything, the most intimate or embarrassing detail, will be talked about. It is this special axis that gives the play, to use Sonya Rudikoff's words, “the distinctively cheeky tone of the sixties,” where its “domesticated intellectual teasing” makes it emblematic of the decade (“Afraid” 245).

Indeed, the audience participates in a complex language game, based as much on saying as doing. The whole play is rich in references to games and rules, beginning with the subtitle of the first act, “Fun and Games.” Others include such

lines as “The game is over” (136); “you can make your own rules . . . but somebody else try it . . . no, sir!” (152–153); “Aw, sure you do, Martha . . . original game-girl, and all” (207); “You know the rules, Martha, for Christ’s sake, you know the rules!” (235). The overall rules of the language games derive, on the one hand, from uncooperative behavior, the reversal of Grice’s cooperation principle, and, on the other, from a very cooperative enterprise of creating a world of make-believe, a private world upon which a private language is constructed. At least three different games are played: “Humiliate the Host,” “Hump the Hostess,” and “Get the Guests.” They each introduce new constitutive rules to define the new game: the rules are of non-cooperation when the game is called irony, but are of cooperation when the game is that of make-believe or deceit. These are Wittgensteinian language games in the sense that here too the only way to learn or teach a rule is through use: meaning is use itself. The characters in the drama are engaged in language games also in the sense Jens Allwood defines this interaction: not only do the receivers apprehend and reconstruct the information given by the sender, but show an understanding, take a stand, and behaviorally react to the information; in short, “communicatively relevant behavior is exhibited by both sender and receiver” (217). Martha and George may be said to be unfair to their guests in the sense that these newcomers have no knowledge of either the faculty’s favored genres and rhetorical practices or the particular facts of George and Martha’s life, which would immediately clarify some of their remarks. Yet in another sense the hosts do play a fair game: by their nature, the rules are capable of being worked out. On the basis of our intuitive knowledge described by Martin Steinmann as rule-, speech act-, genre- and rhetorical competences, their use reveals their meaning (“Rule Competences”). In this light, one can be all the more struck at how “meaning blind,” to use Wittgenstein’s fitting metaphor (*The Blue* 18) the guests, especially Honey, are. Assumptions should be presumptive; the rules could be identified.

The most obvious mechanism deployed in the drama is irony, a verbal articulation of linguistic discrepancies such as truth and falsehood, non-communication, and non-cooperation. Irony represents the extreme violation of the Gricean cooperative principle and, in particular, its maxim of quality: “[m]ake your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (“Logic” 45).

Irony in this play is a technique of revelation: because the ironist means exactly the opposite of what he says, intended meaning is revealed as the opposite of expressed meaning. Hypocrisy, for example, is uncovered as the self-construction of the guests as “good people.” In fact, revelation is irony’s illocutionary force: the revelation of truth is achieved as it overwrites the assumption about the cooperative basis of language and overemphasizes the gap between saying and meaning. Irony as a speech act has a well-definable perlo-

cutionary force too: exorcism. It will help its participants face the lies they had lived in and allow them to correct them.

The other game also involves pretense and deceit, but with the intention of keeping it pretense and deceit. Because it is based on the joint effort of George and Martha, they cooperate as partners in this game. The illocutionary purpose of this game of make-believe is to create a surrogate reality, a simulacrum that recreates a moment of tragedy around the memory of the "son." What remains a secret, though, is the mode of existence of this son: he could be as real as imagined, which latter case is also a valid form of existence, "existence-in-fiction," as Rorty puts it (*Consequences* 118). This son could have died either "imaginatively," or the parents decided to "kill" him, again, either by neglect (not bothering to have a child) or through abortion. We have no way of knowing what happened exactly, but the way George and Martha are handling this topic, their dread as well as compulsion to relive the trauma, and their constant desire to discuss what they both know is emotional taboo for them—well, all this suggests that the game of make-believe circles around abortion.

If the creation of an alternative or surrogate reality is the illocutionary purpose of the game of make-believe, its perlocutionary purpose is also exorcism. Indeed, this conjuring of a ghost becomes therapeutic: Martha and George relive the possibility of having a son, and relive his death too. Actually, they carry out a very effective form of exorcism where they exploit the undecidability between the constative and the performative. George conveys the news of his death in a constative manner, as if he was reporting the contents of a telegram to Martha; but in effect he puts him to death, it seems, by performatively declaring him dead. Their game presents a classroom example of effective exorcism, described by Derrida as having elements of both declaring and inflicting death, being both constative and performative:

[E]ffective exorcism pretends to declare the death only in order to put to death. As a coroner might do, it certifies the death but here it is in order to inflict it. This is a familiar tactic. The constative form tends to reassure. The certification is effective. It wants to be and it must be *in effect*. It is *effectively* a performative. (*Specters* 59)

Martha and George are virtuoso players of the primary speech act game in the play, irony. The situation is ideal for irony. All the required players for irony are present: two ironists and two objects of irony. Of the two ironists, Martha and George, one is always on the stage, with enough objectivity, disengagement, freedom, dispassion, and critical attitude to perfectly fulfill the role of the detached ironist. Yet they are never completely detached, but fundamentally care for the person they are demeaning or ridiculing. Nick and Honey are the two objects of irony; it is to them that ironic speech acts are addressed. Their involvement is constantly changing, but most of the time they are in ironic situations without knowing it. Not being able to question their own social values,

they are unable to recognize ironic situations. Not being able to imagine that people would so easily see through them—and see them for what they are: calculating, selfish, and corrupt—they are also unable to recognize how they are victims of intrigue. Because they fail to comprehend the degree to which their characters are easy scripts to others, they are unable to identify the ironic tone of the conversation:

- Martha:* You think I'm kidding? You think I'm joking? I never joke . . . I don't have a sense of humor. I have a fine sense of the ridiculous, but no sense of humor. I have no sense of humor!
- Honey:* I haven't either.
- Nick:* Yes, you have, Honey . . . a quiet one. (76–77)

Moreover, they are unable to recognize that their words betray them:

- George:* Things are simpler with you . . . you marry a woman because she's all blown up . . . while I, in my clumsy, old-fashioned way . . .
- Nick:* There was more to it than that!
- George:* Sure! I'll bet she has money too!
- Nick:* Yes.
- George:* Yes? *Yes!* You mean I was right? I hit it?
- Nick:* Well, you see . . .
- George:* My God, what archery! First try, too. How about that! (102–103)

Nick and Honey are easy prey to the ironists, who attack them for their inability to cover up what they would rather not have the world see: their marriage based on lies, the faked pregnancies, the marriage for the money of Honey's father, Nick's ruthless ambition, his shameless drive for power, his agism, and the hard scientist's sense of superiority. With the help of ironic speech acts, George and Martha reveal to the discrepancies between truth and lies.

At the same time, the guests are being attacked for another reason too: for being blind to the values lived by Martha and George. Nick cannot imagine how love and care can be at home in irony.

- Martha:* . . . There is only one man in his life who has ever . . . made me happy. Do you know that? One!
- Nick:* The . . . that what-do-you-call-it? . . . uh . . . the lawn mower, or something?
- Martha:* [. . .] No; I didn't mean him; I meant George, of course. Uh . . . George; my husband.
- Nick:* You're kidding.
- .....
- Martha:* Oh . . . you know so little. And you're going to take over the world, hunh? (189–192; 1st ellipsis not in orig.)

Nick and Honey are also being ridiculed for their inability to participate in the language game, for being unable to comprehend the rules. Although Nick does reveal a certain sensitivity to understand concrete ironic situations, he is completely unable to recognize honest remarks in ironic contexts.

*George:* . . . I asked you how you liked that for a declension: Good; better; best; bested. Hm? Well?

*Nick:* I really don't know what to say.

*George:* You really don't know what to say?

*Nick:* All right . . . what do you want me to say? Do you want me to say it's funny, so you can contradict me and say it's sad? or do you want me to say it's sad so you can turn around and say no, it's funny. You can play that play that damn little game any way you want to, you know. (32–33; 1st ellipsis not in orig.)

Irony belongs—together with hints, insinuations, and metaphors—to the class of indirect speech acts first defined by Searle (“Indirect”). Here utterance meaning and sentence meaning come apart; the speaker communicates something different and something more, too, than what is actually said. Or, to use Allwood’s terminology: intended communicative content and apprehended content differ (134). The ironist usually intends to communicate the somehow opposite of what is literally expressed. Moreover, the ironist also conveys distance to the situation, detachment as well as a sense of superiority. Common background assumptions play a major role in the interpretation of irony. Thus, as Allwood puts it, “A can communicate something about his relation to a certain situation by concurrently communicating the conventional content of a certain linguistic expression and intending that B, through his familiarity with the situation, [and] the conventional content of the expression, . . . should draw the conclusion that A does not *mean* what he is literally saying” (134). Irony, in other words, is effective if some background knowledge, common sense assumptions, or pragmatic or linguistic discrepancies in utterance alert the participants to irony.

As a form of uncooperative behavior, irony violates the Gricean maxims of quality: it says something but means something else. Moreover, this discrepancy between saying and meaning is being done without warning signals. This is what the original meaning of the word *eironeia* suggests, too: assumed ignorance in questioning. Irony most often leaves the listener in ignorance or in doubt: “successful irony,” Allwood claims in a footnote, “does not usually involve completely obvious flouting of the norms [of the maxim of quality], but rather leaves the receiver in some doubt about whether the norms have been flouted or not” (241). Norms are being flouted, then, in a coded or covert manner. That is why Nick and especially Honey, lacking an ear for ironic tone and situation, have such difficulties in getting their hosts’ ironic remarks.

The discrepancy between saying and meaning, or intended communicative content and apprehended content basic to irony develops into at least three different mechanisms: (i) the simple negation of literal meaning gives the intended meaning; (ii) the reversal of the illocutionary force of the ironic speech act; (iii) the use of presupposition (and also downgraded predication, entailment, and expectation) logically implying its own negation.

(i) In some cases the opposition of meanings is quite simple: the negation of literal meaning gives the intended meaning of the ironic proposition.

*Martha:* . . . I never joke . . . I don't have a sense of humor. I have a fine sense of the ridiculous, but no sense of humor. I have no sense of humor! (76; 1st ellipsis not in orig.)

\*

*Martha:* Very good, George.

*Martha:* It's the most . . . life you've shown a long time.

*George:* You bring out the best in me, baby. (150–151)

\*

*Martha:* *Why* don't you want to kiss me?

*George:* Well, dear, if I'd kissed you I'd get all excited . . . I'd get beside myself, and I'd take you, by force, right here on the living room rug, and then our little guests would walk in, and . . . well, just think what your father would say about *that*. (15)

In these dialogues, the intended meaning of the ironic utterances is the simple negation of the propositions asserted: “Martha always jokes, and has the finest sense of humor”; “Martha brings out the worst in George”; “Even if George kissed Martha, he would not get excited, would not get beside himself, and would certainly not take her, by force, on the living room rug”; “George does not have a poetic nature.”

(ii) Other cases are more complicated. By flouting the maxim of quality, the sincerity condition of the illocutionary act is violated, turning irony into the intentional expression of insincerity. This claim derives from what Robert L. Brown rightly calls the key of the phenomenon, namely that “only with illocutionary acts with sincerity conditions can be ironically performed” (10). Indeed, illocutionary acts lacking sincerity conditions—such as marrying, christening, assessing, appointing, or nominating—cannot be performed ironically. These acts can be unsuccessful, however, if the agent lacks necessary authority; in other words, if the condition termed by B. G. Campbell as the “knowledge that speaker is duly constituted authority” (12) is not satisfied.

Illocutionary acts expressing psychological states—among which Searle collects such categories as belief, intention, desire, pleasure—all have sincerity conditions. If this condition is violated, if the speaker does not believe what he or she says, or does not believe or intend that his or her wish be fulfilled, or does not

believe that the addressee can supply the information needed, then the illocutionary act may be ironic, as in the following examples.

- George:* What made you decide to be a teacher?  
*Nick:* Oh, . . . well, the same things that . . . uh . . . motivated you, I imagine.  
*George:* What were they?  
*Nick:* Pardon?  
*George:* I said, what were they? What were the things that motivated me? (31)

George's question is ironic because the sincerity condition is intentionally and overtly violated: by repeating and completing the original question, George wants it known that he lacks this condition.

- George:* I'm not trying to tear him down. He's a God, we all know that. (26)

In this ironic metaphor, George again wants it known that the verdictive expressing judgment on his father-in-law lacks sincerity; it is meant not as a praise but as an assault.

There are some more intricate instances of ironic judgment. In the next one George violates the sincerity condition of the speech act, but this sincerity condition does not involve the belief in the validity of the judgment.

- George:* Martha's tastes in liquor have come down . . . simplified over the years .. crystallized. Back when I was courting Martha—well, I don't know if that's exactly the right word for it—but back when I was courting Martha  
 .....  
*George:* But the years have brought to Martha a sense of essential . . . the knowledge that cream is for coffee, lime juice for pies . . . and alcohol pure and simple . . . he you are, angel . . . for the pure and simple. (23–24)

While George's utterances as statements might correspond to facts, his evaluation of these facts is ironic. Similar is the case in the following remark of George:

- Nick:* Don't try to put me in the same class with you!  
*George:* Oh. No, of course not. Things are simpler with you . . . you marry a woman because she's all blown up . . . while I, in my clumsy, old-fashioned way . . . (102)

Lacking sincerity condition in the validity of his own evaluation, George here, too, is ironic: his ways may be considered old-fashioned to an arrogant young man, but morally he is still superior.

(iii) Examples relating to the dissonance between utterer's meaning and sentence meaning reveal yet another subclass of cases. Consider the following:

- Martha:* What the hell do you mean screaming up the stairs like that?  
*George:* We got lonely, darling . . . we got lonely for the soft purr of your little voice. (47)

Irony is at least twofold here. The illocutionary force is reversed: flattery becomes assault because there is irony already in saying that Martha's "little voice" has a "soft purr." Yet George does not put this claim into the assertion, but—by taking it for granted that the hearer agrees with this proposition—leaves it in the presupposition. By bringing about some incompatibility between presupposition and suggested meaning, the presuppositional content of the claim is questioned. The dissonance inherent in irony is here embodied in a mechanism making presuppositions logically imply their own negation. Anyone who utters "We got lonely for the soft purr of your little voice" takes it for granted that "She has a little voice with a soft purr." Yet in George's ironic remark the implied meaning affects the presupposition. In this ironic remark attacking his wife from the enemy position, George brings it to understand that Martha does not have a little voice with a soft purr.

In the following example, irony again turns on presupposition.

- Martha:* Get over here and open the door!  
 . . . . .  
*George:* All right, love . . . whatever love wants. Isn't it nice the way some people have manners, though, even in this day and age? Isn't it nice that some people won't just come breaking into other people's houses even if they *do* hear some sub-human monster yowling at 'em inside . . . ? (19)

Had George only stated that "Some people have manners," his implied meaning would have been ironic already. But irony here turns on a contradiction between presuppositions ("Some people have manners," "Some people won't come breaking into other people's houses") and their logical implications ("Some other people do not have manners," "Some other people do come breaking into other people's houses"). By hiding the ironic opposition into the layer of the embedded (implied) presupposition, George adds another dimension to the complexity of his ironic remarks.

Beside presuppositions, other types of semantic-pragmatic relations such as entailment and expectation may also play a role in irony.

- George:* Yes, Martha? Can I get you something?  
*Martha:* Well . . . uh . . . sure, you can light my cigarette, if you're of a mind to.  
*George:* No v there are limits. I mean, man can put up with only so much [. . .] I'll hold your hand when it's dark and you're afraid of the bogey-man, and I'll tote your gin bottles out after midnight, so no one'll see . . . but I will not light your cigarette. And that, as they say, is that. (50–51)

Irony here attacks the assumption of the marriage contract entailed, on common sense grounds, by the proposition. It also inverts some of the “normal” scale of values: to light somebody’s cigarette is ordinarily an effort not comparable to comforting her in her nightmares. Yet by refusing to light the cigarette, George shows, ironically, the clearest form of uncooperative behavior. Which ultimately comes down to comforting her, concealing her alcoholism, and probably even lighting her cigarette.

But irony is just one kind, albeit the most important one, of the language games played by George and Martha; others are games of the “subjunctive mood,” to borrow again Victor Turner’s term (“Liminality,” *From Ritual*): lies and games of make-believe or deceit. In their discourse the assumption concerning their belief in what they say is suspended; by the same token, their listeners’ assumption that they can take George and Martha at their word should also be suspended—except Nick and Honey don’t really know this, or at least not for a while.

George and Martha invent a language game exactly for the purpose which Rorty described the double process of self-knowledge and self-creation. It is through the game of lies and deceit, invented for their particular purposes and probably always altered to the particular occasions, that they find a way to trace home the causes of their being: by inventing a story in a new language, or language game (*Contingency* 27–28). Theirs is a subjunctive cultural performance on the account that it toys with the possibility or hypothesis of having a child. The son who emerges is obviously not a person, but a possibility: a rhetorical figure indicating the relation which the inventors of the game imagine to have with reality. Through their acts Martha and George perform liminal games of the subjunctive mood, life-crisis rituals that will help them cross thresholds between one place in their lives and another.

Games of irony and deceit are similar in that semantically, as far as reference is concerned, truth-condition is violated. They state a possibility or hypothesis. But while lies have no implicatures, the game of deceit does imply, among other things, something about the fact that they entered a fictional world now, about the intentions of the speaker to create a world of make-believe, and about initiating a semi-serious game. The important difference, in other words, comes in the extent to which each makes its own rhetoric visible: lies are supposed to go unnoticed, but games of deceit have a high visibility in these dialogues.

Indeed, liars do not want to get caught; the listeners are not supposed to know when they are lying.

*George:* There is a moon; the moon is up.

*Martha:* I’m afraid you’re mistaken.

*George:* No; no.

- George:* . . . the moon went down, thought about it for a little . . . considered it, you know what I mean? . . . and then, *pop*, came up again. Just like that.
- Martha:* That is not true! That is such a lie!
- George:* You must not call everything a lie, must she?
- Nick:* Hell, I don't know when you people are lying, or what.
- Martha:* You're damned right!
- George:* You're not supposed to. (198–200; 1st ellipsis not in orig.)

In lies the listener is not supposed to detect the flouting of the maxim of quality: a person lies for a reason, and does not want to be caught.

On the other hand, the person playing a game of deceit does not want the audience to mistake the game for the real: Martha, in this case, is trying to make sure her listener recognizes and perhaps even understands her game.

- Martha:* Our son does *not* have blue hair . . . or blue eyes, for that matter. He has green eyes . . . like mine.
- George:* He has blue eyes, Martha.
- Martha:* *Green!* He has the loveliest green eyes . . . they aren't all flaked with brown or grey, you know . . . hazel . . . they are real green . . . deep, pure green eyes . . . like mine.
- Nick:* Your eyes are . . . brown, aren't they?
- Green:* *Green!* Well, in some lights they *look* brown, but they're green. Not green like this . . . more hazel. George has watery blue eyes . . . milky blue.
- George:* Make up your mind, Martha. (74–75)

This conversation can have no relation to reality; everything happens according to how Martha fictions her private world. This is a reality performatively created, where the difference between deceit and lies is really a matter of perspective: according to the pragmatics of her utterances, she is deceptive, while according to the semantics of the sentences, she is lying. What is important, though, is that she wants to be caught in her game.

Similarly, George gives away his game of deceit in the phrase “blond-eyed blue-haired son,” which seems not just a slip of the tongue, but a deliberate absurdity.

- George:* . . . the one thing in this whole sinking world that I am sure of is my partnership, my chromosomological partnership in the . . . creation of our . . . blond-eyed, blue-haired . . . son. (72; 1st ellipsis not in orig.)

Wayne C. Booth calls such a clue “known error proclaimed” (57), one that seems to act as an alert signal to the discourse of make-believe. It is a son whose existence is made-up, discursively (performatively) constructed, created by a language game. And a deadly serious game for that too. The game is serious for at least two reasons: one, it cuts deep into the lives of these two people, two, a fictional character's existence is no less real than if he had “really” existed. In

their game of deceit, Martha and George certainly make sure that the audience know that their language game is distinct from what Rorty calls “real world (spatio-temporal) talk” (*Consequences* 118).

The *Sprachspiele* of irony and make-believe require a lot from the newcomers. They require an active verbal and non-verbal interaction, the reconstruction and also the undertaking of the problem which lurks behind the language games of George and Martha: the unborn child. The purpose of their game is multiple, but cleansing and reconciliation are primary among them. The ending certainly shows the speech irony as having a strong perlocutionary function in that, as Paul de Man succinctly puts it, it “consoles and it promises and it excuses” (*Aesthetic* 165). Indeed, both irony and make-believe appear as the modern version of *katharsis*, itself described as performative by Andrew Ford, performing the ritual of “cleansing,” “purification of the soul,” or “intellectual clarification” of the characters, as well as “a moral refinement of the spectator’s soul” (“Katharsis” 110–111). Through their cruel but effective game, the players achieve an additional perlocutionary effect: by the end they will have dumped the hidden problem on the new couple through having them participate in their game of exorcism.