

CHAPTER TWO

EXTENDING THE PERFORMATIVE

“Little by little, they taught me how to be Peter Stillman.
They said: you are Peter Stillman.”
(Paul Auster)

In the past decade or so, the performative has become a generative concept in poststructuralist critical thinking. Within this framework, the performative has come to be seen as not just contesting the primacy of the signified over the signifier, but also as a case of meaning production not involving reference. Indeed, performativity has been understood as a function of the signifier only, a non-referential discursive operation. The paradigm originally devised for a particular group of verbs, the performative has now been extended to all kinds of discursive processes where signification comes about discursively out of mere signifiers. Most prominent among these processes is the (discursive) construction of the (discursive) subject, where the performative has provided a pragmatic form whereby certain constitutive processes can be conceptualized in non-essentialist thinking. In other words, the performative refutes the essentialist position taken earlier with regard to subjectivities by showcasing the inflections of gender, sexuality, and race as produced by language. Independent of whether the identities in question are stable or unstable, unproblematic or problematic, intelligible or unintelligible, dominant or non-dominant, the performative establishes the ways they all come about as effects of discourse. Moreover, as effects produced by the performative, inflections of gender, race, or sexual identity will be shown to exist only in the symbolic: not as referents but as metaphors or catachreses brought about solely by discourse.

I use the word *discourse* in its poststructuralist, primarily Foucauldian, understanding, as the general domain (or individualizable group) of statements and practices which determines what we think, how we see reality and ourselves (see *Archeology* 49, 80). Discourses set the limits within which our thinking can proceed. As Sara Mills explains, “[i]n the process of apprehending, we categorise and interpret experience and events according to the structures available to us and, in the process of interpretation, we lend these structures a solidity and a normality which it is often difficult to think outside of” (54). As such, discourses can be considered to make up the episteme, defined by Foucault as “the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems” (*Archeology* 191). In other words, the episteme—the configuration which structures thought

and knowledge—defines the frameworks of discourse containing all that is knowable, thinkable, and speakable in a particular age.

The performative was picked up by philosophers and theorists in the 1970s and especially 1980s and 1990s. Radical thinkers used speech act theory in support of their critique of metaphysics; among these are Jacques Derrida (“Signature Event Context”; *Limited Inc*; *Specters of Marx*; “Performative Powerlessness”; *Negotiations*), Roland Barthes (“The Death of the Author”), Stanley Fish (*Is There a Text in This Class?*), Shoshana Felman (*The Scandal of the Speaking Body*; *Claims of Literature*), and J. Hillis Miller (*Versions of Pygmalion*; *Tropes, Parables, Performatives*; *Speech Acts in Literature*; *On Literature*; *Literature as Conduct*). At the same time, feminist critics put the performative in the middle of their constructionist work on the subject, especially when exploring gender, sexual, and racial identity; among them are Diana Fuss (*Essentially Speaking*), Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*; “For a Careful Reading”; *Excitable Speech*; *The Psychic Life of Power*; *Undoing Gender*), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (*The Epistemology of the Closet*; *Touching Feeling*). A performative perspective on the subject allows one to see subjectivities as “large” and multitudinous in the Whitmanesque way, as something that is constantly made and remade, the product of language processes, therefore multiform, variable, and permeable. The performative in the poststructuralist framework grants a conceptional tool for understanding the subject as a catachrestic discursive construct, a function of the signifier that does not lean on a fixed and independent signified. Moreover, speech act theory allows one to trace the process of the production of both marked and unmarked elements of dichotomies such as woman/man, black/white, homosexual/heterosexual.

As I will elaborate later in this chapter, the performative has helped to explain how both texts and readings can depend on performative processes. Of these two, the former is the more familiar territory. It is in the text where the performative has been known to discursively bring about certain states of affairs: where words make things happen. As opposed to the descriptive (constative) mode, the performative is capable of fulfilling what Henry McDonald calls the “ontological role” of language: the performative “subverts the ‘metaphysical’ role traditionally given language as a reflection or mimesis of reality, substituting in its place an ‘ontological’ role of language as an ungrounded mode of being” (58), ungrounded, that is, in reality, or the reality of the referent, and existing instead as catachresis.

Therefore, in addition to considering texts as performative, reading, I will insist, can also be considered performative in the sense that a new reading can bring into existence something in the text that did not exist prior to this particular reading. The performative understanding of reading, together with the performative’s interaction with presuppositions, which I will introduce and define

subsequently, can help explain the emergence of new interpretations that have emerged in the process of current revisionist readings of the American canon.

In the following, I will argue for performativity as a fundamental category of textuality and discursivity, inherently tied to the signifying structure of language. Performative analysis will show that performative constructions of the subject have a catachrestic nature, that is, they are discursive productions lacking their literal or real referents. As such they too, to adopt Foucault's words, ignore the power of language "to designate, to name, to show, to reveal, to be the place of meaning or truth"; they too suspend "the point of view of the 'signified'" and are "hollowed by absence" (*Archeology* 111).

Performativity in theories of the subject

Subject, subjectivity, identity—these terms evoke issues that have defined theories of culture and society of the past decades. As I already claimed in the Introduction, I observe several different meanings of the term *subject*. In its (1) general meaning, the subject basically means person or human being (this is the subject as persona or individual). In its (2) narrower sense, a subject can be (i) the nominal taking the subject position in the sentence (this is the grammatical subject) and (ii) the person who speaks, sees, and acts (this is subject as agent). Moreover, in this narrower sense, the subject has a third meaning which goes somewhat counter to the first two (i-ii) meanings: (iii) the person subjected to some power (as, for example, subject to the crown). In terms of the relationship between *subject* or *subjectivity* and *identity*, I see several differences in spite of the fact that in critical practice they are used as near synonyms, often as interchangeable terms. In my reading, the differences between *subject* or *subjectivity* and *identity* relate to (i) theoretical context, (ii) part/whole relationship, (iii) degree of consciousness, and (iv) degree of fluidity or fixity. First, *identity*—originally referring to some core and stable element of the self—is taken from the discourse of modernity (yet its understanding as process or construction allows it to be used in the poststructuralist context too), while *subject* or *subjectivity*—referring to variable and permeable entities produced in discourse—is part of postmodernist discourse predicated on the postmodern episteme. Second, *identity* refers more to social inflections or markers, or separate segments of the self, ones that can be shown to correspond to various social categories (such as gender, race, class, sexuality) which one's *subjectivity* as a whole is inflected by. Accordingly, *identity* is often defined by only one specific inflection (this is what Anthony Appiah and Amy Guttmann call the "imperialism of identity" [*Color Conscious* 103]), while *subject* is used as incorporating—or inflected by—multiple identifications or, as Nick Mansfield points out, as an "abstract or general principle that defies our separation into distinct selves" (3). Third, the

difference between the two terms should be searched in the degree of consciousness as well. Subjectivity implies a higher degree of self-awareness, where the subject is constituted as object, the object of study, for himself or herself. This is the sense in which Foucault uses the term as well, when speaking of the “domain of possible knowledge” resulting from observing the ways “in which the subject experiences himself in a game of truth where he relates to himself” (*Aesthetics* 461). Fourth, as opposed to fixed (albeit evolving) identity markers, subjectivity is a shifting-moving process, a set of positions inscribed and reinscribed by discourse.

The poststructuralist understanding of performativity contests the assumption of a subject as signified, one pre-existing the utterance or existing independently of language. Until it got contested in the second part of the 20th century, this autonomous and self-conscious individual—conceptualized during the early modern era and dramatized, for example, in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as the self-reflective modern man thinking his way into action and agency—served as an axiom of Western thought. Indeed, the concept goes back to René Descartes’ *cogito*, the “I think, therefore I am” maxim of thinking and doubting and struggling to know—of a self, we must add, that exists before it thinks and experiences, and is taken as the basis of being. The Cartesian self conceptualized during the Enlightenment was further developed in the 18th century, with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s insistence on the autonomy of individual experience, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac’s idea of the uttered word as rooted in thought rooted in turn in action, John Locke’s emphasis on rational control, Benjamin Franklin’s trust in the (self-)perfectibility of man, and Immanuel Kant’s concept of rational agency and unity of the self, among others. In the 19th century such equations between rational thinking and “humanity” will serve as the basis for the spectacular exclusions of blacks and women from the “universal” ideal of the human, giving an impetus, in the United States, to the anti-slavery movement and, in both Europe and the U.S., to suffragette action. Justifications for these latter will include arguments—coming from Frederick Douglass and Margaret Fuller, for example—assigning the faculties of the self to those formerly excluded. The control of the self is newly problematized by Friedrich Nietzsche, allowing the idea of self-construction enter his philosophical system. Critiquing the Cartesian unified consciousness, Sigmund Freud’s modern psychology assumes a subjectivity which, though split and therefore not in our full control, relies on self-knowledge and grants a certain degree of agency. Jacques Lacan’s approach will take a shift from the ruling Freudian model in acknowledging the separation of the desire for control over selfhood from the illusion of such control, or, in the mirror stage, the child’s recognition of the distinction between self and other, as well as between the visual gestalt of the complete external image and the child’s sense of its own fragmented self. With Lacan’s linguistic turn—insisting that the subject is always the speaking subject, one defined in and by language, and that

language is the site where self-identity happens—the idea of the self-existing Cartesian subject suffered a serious blow.

Of course, psychoanalysis was only one discipline that critiqued the modern idea of subjectivity and agency: linguists, philosophers, semioticians, literary and cultural theorists such as Émile Benveniste, Jacques Derrida, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Teresa de Lauretis, Julia Kristeva, and Judith Butler, for example, have shared a similar insistence on how language, ideology, power, knowledge, social technologies, the abject, and the Other construct us, by signification, interpellation, and subjection, into subjects that are never free, never unified, and never an origin. Underlying these various claims, which I will summarize briefly in the next paragraph, is the recognition of the tripartite specific meaning of the word *subject*, referring equally to (i) the process of becoming a subject of a linguistic occasion (the subject of the sentence, the one assuming the speaking position), (ii) the process of becoming a speaking-seeing-acting agent, and to (iii) the process of becoming subordinated, subjected, to some power, or force, or system. This subjectivation—that is, of being (i-ii) produced and (iii) subjugated at the same time—is captured by Foucault’s term *assujettissement*, which denotes both the process of becoming a grammatical subject and agent, on the one hand, and, on the other, the process of becoming subjugated to forces “which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviors.” Here subjects are gradually constituted “through a multiplicity of organisms, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc.,” and “subjection in its material instance” is the “constitution of subjects” (*Power/Knowledge* 97).² Subjects are, therefore, produced by power. Applying this claim to the inflections of subjectivity which I will examine later (gender, race, and sexuality), one could say that only by being subjected to the juridical norms of manhood or womanhood, whiteness or blackness, or heterosexuality or homosexuality does one have culturally intelligible gender, race, and sexuality. As Foucault puts it in connection with sexuality,

sexuality owes its very definition to the action of the law: not only will you submit your sexuality to the law, but you will have no sexuality except by subjecting yourself to the law. (*History* 128)

Prominent among theorists dislodging the *cogito* is Benveniste, who emphasized the primacy of language in providing the possibility of subjectivity: it is in the sentence that the ‘I’ constitutes itself as subject: “the basis of subjectivity is in the exercise of language” (“Subjectivity” 730). For Derrida, one becomes a subject only by being subjected to the signifying practices of language: “the subject (self-identical or even conscious of self-identity, self-

² Both these processes support the claim made by József Szili in connection with literature as process (see „Az irodalom mint folyamat” 175ff).

conscious) is inscribed in the language, . . . he is a 'function' of the language. He becomes a *speaking* subject only by conforming his speech . . . to the system of linguistic prescriptions taken as the system of differences, or at least to the general law of *différance*" ("Différance" 396; emphasis in original). For Althusser it is primarily apparatuses (such as literature) and institutions (such as the church, family, and school) that reproduce the values of ideology which will "interpellate" or hail the individual—with the power of force similar to that of the police; it is this hailing by which the interpellated person becomes a socially constituted subject (*Lenin*). For Foucault, too, power acts through institutions, which produce subjects as "objects of knowledge and at the same time objects of domination" ("Beginnings" 213); yet only by being subjected to disciplinary discourses is the subject's self-constitution possible. Power is enhanced by knowledge in bringing about a maximum effect on the individual, the individual being "one of [power's] prime effects" (*Power/Knowledge* 98)—such is the function of the prison, as well as hospitals, schools, or banks: to individualize, normalize, and hierarchize the subject (*Discipline*), or to regulate sexual practices by various technologies of sex (*History*). Foucault examines the various forms of what he calls "techniques or technology of the self," whereby the individuals will carry out "a certain number of operations on their own bodies, . . . souls, . . . thoughts, . . . conduct" in order to "transform themselves, modify themselves" ("Beginnings" 214). Most notable among these technologies of the self are the discursive or linguistic technologies, such as the confession, which is a technique oriented toward "the discovery and the formulation of the truth about oneself" (214). Of course, confession can be understood here to include all autobiographical genres as well as discursive utterances of the ego which, as forms of self-making and "self-understanding," to quote Foucault again (213), allow one "to produce and publish the truth about oneself" (214).

De Lauretis applied Foucault's idea of complex technologies of the self to gender, and suggested to include such "social technologies" as cinema, institutionalized discourses, as well as practices of daily life, thus defining gender as both the product and process of its representation and self-representation (*Technology*). For Kristeva, the subject is formed from a defensive position, during the process of attempting to establish a dividing line between self and Other by constantly pushing away those forces threatening its borders which she calls *abject*—such as the maternal body or corporeal waste (*Powers*).

As poststructuralist commentaries deconstructed the distinction between pre-existing and constructed subjectivities, and insisted that the subject was always already constructed as a function or effect of power and its discourses, Butler applied this deconstructive gesture to the sex/gender (or nature/culture) binary, pointing out that "sex" is not a biological given but "is as culturally constructed as gender"; therefore, it is "always already gender" (*Gender Trouble* 7) and the body ("nature") is "always already a cultural sign" (71). Moreover, not

only does gender come first, but there is nothing beneath the mask of regulatory behavior effected by society: gender is performative. “That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (136).

Thus predicated on the notions of construction and performative process, the subject in poststructuralist theories is anchored in language and is viewed as a function of the sentence.

Language can be performative without employing performative verbs; indeed, as Butler claims, “it’s most performative when its performativity is least explicit . . . most of all when it isn’t even embodied in actual words” (qtd in Sedgwick, *Touching* 6). Moreover, performativity is really an effect of language, not its cause. Whether we take the subject as created by speech or, for that matter, the author brought about in writing, language can be said to produce its use. As Roland Barthes famously claims in his “The Death of the Author,”

[I]nguistically, the author is never more than the instance of writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance of saying *I*: language knows a “subject,” not a “person,” and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language “hold together,” suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it. (1467)

Indeed, as poststructuralism calls into question language or the text as a transparent medium “revealing” a reality behind it, the subject or self that pre-exists the text (or can have an existence outside the realm of language) is concomitantly repudiated. Poststructuralist theorists will not insist on a solipsistic existence similar to Forty-four’s in Mark Twain’s *The Mysterious Stranger*; the movement away from the referent does not imply a denial of the referent. What is asserted by poststructuralism, however, is that this referent cannot exist as self-presence: all our experience is mediated by the signifying practices of culture, or, in fact, is constructed through discourse. Of course, people do exist even before they speak, even before they construct themselves *as subjects* in discourse. But their existence as subjects depends on how they speak, how they construct themselves in language; the self as a system of representations evolves out of the text. For example, when in July 1862, Emily Dickinson sends her fourth letter to T. W. Higginson, saying, “I had no portrait, now, but am small, like the Wren, and my Hair is bold, like the Chestnut Bur—and my Eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves” (Letter 268), she is (she constructs herself as)—at least as far as the meaning of her words is concerned—no more than a small wren-like woman, with bold hair and brown eyes. Or, to take another example, she might be all kinds of other things too, but when in 1864 she complains to her sister Lavinia, “I have been sick so long I do not know the sun” (Letter 435), she constitutes herself solely as the subject of the sentence, the figure saying “I,” and illness will emerge as the dominant marker of her subjectivity. Subjected to the meanings

produced by the sentence, or subjected to discourse, the speaker's subjectivity is purely textual. As Barthes puts it in the passage quoted earlier, this subject too is "never more than the instance of writing": the figure produced by the subject of the sentence. The subject of Dickinson's sentence takes the subject-position defined solely by what is being narrated in the text. The conclusion is at hand: subjectivity is narrative, something that can be related in a coherent narrative.

Who can then become the subject of the sentence? Who is allowed to take agency by becoming the subject capable of self-construction? This problematics is intricately tied to interlocking and parallel dichotomies, dominant in Western thought for centuries, of subject and object, self and other, mind and body, agent and patient, dominant and subjugated, speaking and being spoken to or of, seeing and being seen, active and passive, desiring and desired, man and woman, white and black, heterosexual and homosexual, etc. Given the hierarchies implicit in binary structures, where the unmarked category is always assumed to be dominant with regards to the marked category, subjectivity can be defined as a property of the unmarked position: as belonging to the self, the mind, the agent, the one who speaks, sees, and desires. (On dominant categories positioned as "unmarked generic," see Peggy Phelan 5.) As Donna Haraway puts it, "[o]nly those occupying the positions of the dominators are self-identical, unmarked, disembodied, unmediated, transcendent, born again" ("Persistence" 289). Given the gendered, racialized, and sexualized nature of these categories, this is, in particular, the white heterosexual male. Conversely, those in the marked positions—who are defined in their otherness, their corporeality, their being the objects of language and vision, patients "suffering" the acts of agents (who they are not), in short, as Gilles Deleuze puts it, as "object beings" (Foucault-Deleuze 206)—are excluded from subjectivity; they are, in particular, women, people of color, homosexuals, and other members of the category of the Other. Not only can we say in general that subjectivity is an effect of power, but that it is an effect of all the individual constituents of power—those constituents that are each affected by power: language, vision, action, positionality, as well as gender, race, sexuality, etc.

Let me take the example of the body. Viewed as a container (of the soul), an instrument or tool (for the expression of some underlying substance, consciousness), as something material—therefore finite, defective, decaying, and mortal—as opposed to the spiritual, infinite, and immortal nature of the soul, the body was conceptualized as the element taking the secondary position in the Cartesian binary. Moreover, as something visible (hiding the invisible), the body as a marked category is the object exposed to the senses—as opposed to the unmarked category of the subject of the seeing mind. Given the all-pervasive gendering of the Cartesian categories, the mind was as clearly associated with maleness, as the body was with femaleness. Woman is assigned the position of the body, "weighed down," as Beauvoir puts it, "by everything peculiar to it," while man molds himself as the "inevitable, like a pure idea, like the One, the All, the Absolute

Spirit” (146). Women have been traditionally assigned a life centered around the body—in both applying regimes of beauty to their own body and reproducing and nurturing the bodies of others.

Modernity begins, Foucault claims, when “the brutal fact” of the body comes to be viewed as the defining element of the self; at this time “the human being begins to exist within his organism, inside the shell of his head, inside the armature of his limbs, and in the whole structure of his physiology” (*The Order of Things* 317, 318). This modern interest in the body was accelerated in the 20th century, contesting, however, the earlier claim of corporeal unity. Poststructuralist theories insist that the human body is not something *a priori* given, but a cultural text brought about by knowledge, power, and discourse. Bodies, therefore, are not born, but are produced by signifying practices. As such, the body ceases to be the opposite of the soul, but becomes instead a surface inscribed by various social discourses, whose aim is to homogenize, normalize and ultimately control the body. Indeed, the body is perhaps the primary, most obvious territory of the exercise of power; it is, as Susan Bordo points out, both “a text of culture” and “a *practical*, direct locus of social control” (*Unbearable* 165). The body comes to be viewed as a construction, a surface, written over by various kinds of inscriptions of power; and just like any other form of writing, these cultural texts are then open to signification. The controlling discourses that inscribe the body are especially obvious in the case of women; these are the oppressive regimes of the “beauty myth,” to use Naomi Wolf’s term (*The Beauty Myth*): the dress or costume, makeup, jewelry, diet, exercise, prosthetic devices, the surgical knife, and the laser beam, among others. Among the other marks of normativity forming the embodied subjects, Rosi Braidotti lists forms of knowledge and disciplines too: for example, biology, demography, family sociology, psychoanalysis, and anthropology (*Nomadic Subject* 59). As a surface inscribed and re-inscribed by knowledge, power, and discourse, the body—and especially the female body—is clearly positioned as object. “Positioning is,” Donna Haraway points out, “the key practice in grounding knowledge organized around the imagery of vision” (“Persistence” 289). In other words, not only is the body subjected to knowledge, power, and discourse, which act upon its inscriptive surface during the process of subjugation, but also to vision. The body’s subjection to knowledge, power, and discourse is a process inseparable from its positioning as object: the body becomes the object of the gaze, a spectacle, through being subjected to discourses of power, vision among them. To quote Haraway again, “[v]ision is *always* a question of the power to see” (287–288; emphasis in original).

Taking the position of the subject, whether in the sentence or in social relations, has proved to be especially important for culturally imperialized groups: women, people of color, the poor, the homosexual, the colonized, and the disabled, among others. These are the social groups that were traditionally

excluded from the universalized category of the human subject, and were assigned the position of the object—in the sentence, of the gaze, as well as of oppression. Whether for reasons of gender, race, or sexuality, these groups were reified by the gendered, racialized, or sexualized economy of the gaze, speech, desire, and action, and came to be positioned as objects in all these economies. Justified by arguments originating in Enlightenment thinking, they were excluded from the larger category of rationality—rationality, which has been, as Jessica Benjamin pointed out, “contaminated by control,” and been responsible for solidifying the hegemonic relationship between “a controlling subject and an objectified world” (*Bonds of Love* 193).

Feminist, postcolonial, queer, and other cultural theorists have repeatedly drawn attention to the fact that two opposing tendencies have coexisted in the past decades in discussions about the subject: on the one hand, poststructuralist theories claim that the subject is dead, while on the other hand, identity movements—in politics and literature, for example—have asserted new racial, gendered, sexual, and classed subjectivities, granting them autonomy and agency (without denying their social construction). As Butler puts it in connection with women, “when women are beginning to assume the place of subjects, postmodern positions come along to announce that the subject is dead” (“Contingent” 48).

The social groups that have fallen victim to this thought are the same as those that had earlier fallen victim to modern thought: the colonial subject or “subaltern,” to use Gayatri Spivak’s term (“Can the Subaltern Speak?”). They have suffered repeated exclusions, from power and language alike, in processes that are intertwined in multiple ways. But in both cases exclusion led to the constitution of subjecthood, political as well as discursive. In the first case, exclusion from the modern notion of the autonomous individual has led these groups to claim agency through political identity movements. Along the way, they have uncovered the survival of certain metanarratives, whose purpose was to help perpetuate, already within the postmodern framework, versions of the Cartesian self. As Patricia Waugh points out, one such surviving myth is the patriarchal metanarrative, “the inheritance of a particular ideal of subjectivity defined in terms of transcendence and pure rationality,” which functions “just as effectively within our so-called ‘postmodern age’ as in any other age” (209). Patriarchal language has been similarly appropriated by men, while women, denied the right to speak, have been excluded from language’s subject-producing potential. Postmodern subjecthood (where the subject is proclaimed dead) has come to be viewed by postcolonial theorists as a way of locking them, Nick Mansfield points out, “in an earlier subjectivity of oppression . . . or else they are not recognized at all” (127). Given the intimate ties between power and language, the formerly silenced groups and individuals will reclaim their subjectivities by resisting the ideology that constructed them as objects and by constructing themselves as

subjects, speaking as subjects and by appropriating a place as subjects in dominant discourse.

The simultaneous emergence of these contradictory—humanistic or modern and postmodern—ways of thinking cannot be taken as accidental; rather, they seem co-dependent, or at least interrelated. True, there is no disagreement among poststructuralist theoreticians concerning the discursive or social constructedness of the self, yet this same theory will make room for a subjectivation process that is able to resist the social technologies of power: in the form of Foucauldian *assujettissement* (*Power/Knowledge* 97), Althusserian ideology, “hailing” and thereby subjecting the individual into a “subject” “in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection” (*Lenin* 182), or simply through struggling with Beauvoir’s Other (*Second Sex* xxii). Probably this “possibility of transformation” (Belsey, “Constructing” 597) is the closest the postmodern subject can get to the idea of agency. The subject here is conceptualized, like in Kristeva, as a process (“The Subject”) capable of surpassing the state of being subjected by resisting the controlling norms. Thus, poststructuralist theories can accept the idea of agency as, to use Butler’s definition, “the assumption of a purpose *unintended* by power” (*Psychic Life* 15; emphasis in original). (I will return to the issue of intention later.)

In this line of thinking, the subject’s agency is not a prediscursive given, having “some stable existence prior to the cultural field that it negotiates,” as Butler puts it (*Gender Trouble* 182), but is produced discursively. It is produced either “originally” by the discourse of power (in the case of dominant groups) or by the subject’s resistance to the discourse of power, “originally” constituting her or him as other or object, through his or her new discourse (in the case of non-dominant groups). This second understanding of subjectivity as fully constituted by discursive resistance is of utmost importance because this is where poststructuralist thinking does allow for the possibility of agency. Indeed, as will be amply illustrated later, performative constructionism does not imply either determinism or the death of the agent or author, for performative constructions of subjectivities can come about against accepted norms as well. To take an example from postcolonial theory, strategies of subaltern groups of adopting masks and other forms of mimicry can also be taken, Homi Bhabha insists, as instances of “subaltern agency” or “performative agency” since they disrupt and even parody all notions of “true” identity (*Location* 185).

The issue of agency, however, is intimately tied to the issue of intentionality. A divisive concept in speech act theory already, intentionality has provoked disagreements in poststructuralist theories as well. Austin himself—while emphasizing, in various formulations, the role of convention in constituting the speech act (*How to Do* 127, for example)—connected the felicity of the performative to intentionality (21) and excluded from consideration all “non-serious” utterances as ones “parasitic upon . . . normal use” (22). Post-Austinian

speech act theorists went further towards tying meaning and felicity (of the speech act) to speaker's intention without always trying to strike the proper balance between convention and intention. In one article, Grice defined meaning in terms of "utterer's intention" ("Meaning" 59), while in another he insisted that speech acts, just like any other acts, must be explained in terms of the goals or intentions of the agent of the action, in this case the speaker, and emphasized the cooperative principle of communication ("Logic and Conversation"). (I discussed Grice's cooperative principle and his idea of implicature in my chapter on Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.) Peter F. Strawson, in line with Austin's exclusion of "non-serious" utterances from illocutions, also defined meaning in terms of communicative intention and rationality ("Intention"). In their intention-centered theory, Kent Bach and Robert M. Harnish proposed that intention is crucial to the successful accomplishment of certain non-ceremonial acts like asking or stating, while admitted that other acts—such as marrying or christening—rely on the primary illocutionary mechanism of convention (*Linguistic Communication*). By introducing the concepts of indirect speech acts (where the implicit or primary performative can be interpreted as belonging to at least two different performative formulae, or where "one illocutionary act is performed indirectly by way of performing another" [Searle, "Indirect" 60]) and the sincerity condition (the condition that in order for the performative to have force, it must be uttered by someone who sincerely believes in its power), Searle also provided arguments in support of an intention-based theory ("Indirect").

Seeing the issue more problematic, poststructuralist theorists questioned the centrality of authorial control in the creation of a text's meaning, and entered into debate with speech act theorists concerning intentionality. This disagreement culminated in the well-known debate between Derrida and Searle in *Glyph*, where the issues at stake involved not only the "parasitism" or non-parasitism and seriousness or non-seriousness of speech acts, but also the possibility of context "saturated" or "non-saturated" by intention" (see Derrida's "Signature Event Context," Searle's "Reiterating the Differences," and Derrida's "Limited Inc abc." and *Limited Inc.*). In his "Signature Event Context," Derrida critiqued, among others, Austin's insistence on authorial intention and his opposing of serious vs. non-serious speech acts. Derrida questioned intentionality and sincerity as determining factors in the production of meaning by claiming that any piece of "written communication" can only remain "readable" if its meaning does not depend on the presence of intention itself depending on the presence of the writer (179).

To write is to produce a mark that will constitute a sort of machine which is productive in turn, and which in my future disappearance will not, in principle, hinder in its functioning. . . . I ought to be able to say my disappearance, pure and simple, my non-presence in general, for instance the non-presence of my intention of saying something meaningful. (180–181)

In other words, a text remains meaningful even after the death “pure and simple” of its author because its meaning is not tied to authorial intention. Derrida takes the possibility of this “disengagement” of writing from its author’s intention and presence—“the possibility of its functioning being cut off . . . from its ‘original’ desire-to-say-what-one-means [*vouloir-dire*]”—as belonging “to the structure of every mark, spoken or written” (185). It is not intention, he goes on, but repetition and quotation, or “iterability,” that provides the footing for performative force. Refuting Austin’s notion of both intentionalism and “parasitism,” Derrida makes the claim that all performatives rely on a general citationality or iterability.

How is agency related to intentionality thus problematized? As I see it, agency and intentionality either coincide or do not coincide, depending on the kind of subjectivity construction and on who we take to “own” intention and agency. As I have pointed out earlier, subjects are either constructed by power (in the case of dominant groups) or through *assujettissement*, that is, when they are self-constructed through resisting power that earlier subjected them (in the case of non-dominant groups). In the first case, subjectivity is intended by power, while in the second, it is unintended by it. But one should also add that in the former case, subjectivity is assigned to the dominant subject through the citation and repetition of conventional norms, Derridian iterability, and not through the intention of the subject. In this case, intention is with power and not with the subject to whom agency is assigned; here, conventionalized rules will play a major role. In the case of *assujettissement*, however, agency is appropriated against the intention of power (it is unintended by power); subjectivity is here intended by the subject taking agency. Citationality is also involved, of course, but we cannot talk about the mere replaying of norms; rather, power conventions are cited but at the same time transferred too, from the formerly dominant to the newly dominant subject. (I will further elaborate this differentiation between the two forms of subjectivity in the next subchapter, where I discuss what I term *performance* and *performative* constructions of the subject.)

In addition to the contradiction surrounding agency in postmodern thinking described above, I would like to point to another, equally important contradiction between discursive and “real” existence. Here are from some common sense questions: doesn’t a subject have to pre-exist in order to act and perform? How is it possible for a “discursive construct” to be constructed with a prior existence? If subjects are merely discursive, what is it that exists in reality?

Before producing my argument which will hopefully answer these questions and reconcile this second contradiction, I would like to engage myself with a critical version of social constructionism, where the idea of being socially constructed does not apply to everything that surrounds us. I want to restrict social constructivism to those instances where the object in question—whether it is what people are or what people do—changes because of the way we perceive

it. Being a good mother, for example, is shaped by the idea of “good motherhood,” much like the act of date rape is shaped by our relatively new perception of it. In these cases, being or doing things is shaped by the perception and categorization of that particular thing in discourse; in this process, not only is the “thing” socially constructed, but the subject too who is or does that. Discourse will then construct the person. Such instances are described by Ian Hacking, one of the severest critics of social construction theories, as acceptable cases of social construction, where what is classified can interact with the classifications. He calls them “interactive kinds” (103) as opposed to “indifferent kinds,” where the difference lies in the interaction or non-interaction of object with idea. He brings the example of children and the idea of childhood to the former and plutonium and the idea of plutonium for the latter: while children seem to interact with the idea of childhood in the sense that “children now . . . are different from children at some other time, because the idea of childhood . . . is different now” (102), plutonium “does not interact with the idea of plutonium” (105). In other words, only those objects can be said to be socially constructed which interact with the idea of the object. This understanding leaves room, I believe, for both social construction and an acknowledged reality encompassing discursive *and* pre-discursive entities alike.

Given this framework where social construction and the category of the real can coexist, I return now to my second contradiction to be reconciled. I believe that the following two claims together hold true: (a) the subject is a discursive construct catachrestically lacking its referent and (b) this discursive subject belongs to what we perceive as “reality.” First, I describe the performed subject as catachresis, a metaphor lacking its literal referent, in order to emphasize the discursively produced nature of the subject. Performatively produced in discourse, the subject as subject lacks its “original” referent in “reality.” The subject is as much of a catachrestic constructs as is the pronoun, which, Benveniste has pointed out, refer to “something very peculiar which is exclusively linguistic”; indeed, the “reality” to which personal pronouns refer is “the reality of the discourse” (see “Subjectivity” 730). Of course, some entity will already exist in order to be able to perform or be constructed; discourses must have a “body” to act upon. But this entity or body cannot be called subject yet, not even the referent of the construct to be produced. For the end-product is purely linguistic or discursive; it has no “original” literal referent with a mode of existence preceding its existence in language. The subject is then a catachresis, constructed as subject solely by language.

Second, it is this subject produced catachrestically by discourse which will metaleptically take its place in “reality” (itself permeated and mediated by discourses, of course). For while the subject does not originate in reality but in discourse, it will, as a discursive construct, exist and operate, metaleptically, in reality. Indeed, as Kaja Silverman puts it, “the speaking subject belongs to . . . the domain of the real, but it can attain subjectivity or self-apprehension only through

the intervention of signification” (196). Thus anchored in the “domain of the real,” the subject resists turning into Baudrillardian simulacrum, one generated “by models of a real without origin or reality” (“Precession” 343). Instead, the subject, as a discursive construct, becomes a category of the real.

Performance and performative constructions of the subject

Now I want to follow up on the differentiation between the two forms of subjectivity, which I outlined in my discussion of intentionality and agency. Put simply, subjectivity can be said to performatively come about in two distinct ways: produced in accordance with the dominant (hailing) ideology and out of resistance to this ideology; revealing an existing (discursive) reality and creating a new (discursive) ontology; reflecting or quoting prior texts and processes and bringing about new texts and processes. The first in each pair is always representation, the dramatic or theatrical replaying of some existing social script; the second is the (discursive) ontologization of some newly performed entity. While there may be cases where this distinction is not fully operative, on the whole I think it is important to distinguish between these two modes in which performativity functions. Indeed, some cases are more obviously expressive (evocative, mimetic, representational, theatrical), relying on some dramatic-social-cultural script, others are more self-producing (anti-mimetic, non-representational, anti-theatrical, and self-referential) in the sense that they perform acts and construct identities without following any existing script. In this latter case the performative itself brings about the new script. Of course, while the performative allows the ontologizing aspect of language and literature to emerge, it does not totally do away with the representational or mimetic-quoting aspect. Indeed, some element of representation and self-reflection is always retained, since as a conventional act, the performative depends on evoking existing scripts.

Where relevant, I will distinguish between (i) *performances* and (ii) *performatives*. I hope my case studies will testify to the usefulness of this distinction in spite of the fact that it is in no way a totalizing binary, separating all cases. For I certainly believe that clear categories do not exist, and those texts which I introduce as examples for clear categories might be further problematized (shown to exhibit marks of transitionality and transgression).

(i) I introduce the term *performance* (with the last syllable in italics) to designate instances where expressive citationality is dominant in making subjectivities; these processes appeal to existing conventions, and invoke existing traditions. Such instances of subjectivity *performances* indeed express some pre-existing identity conventions; they are directly used by hailing ideologies, while at the same time reproduce ruling ideologies to which society has subjected the

subject. This is the case where subjectivity and agency are intended by power, while convention and iteration play a major role. Indeed, this is the theatrical version of performativity, when an existing script is being acted out on the stage, so to speak, and corresponds to Erving Goffman's suggestion that since people played out roles in their ordinary lives, life itself is "a dramatically enacted thing" (*Presentation* 72)

These *performances* are expressive, but what they express is not some ontological essence seated in the body and then given expression by clothes, behavioral styles, or ways of thinking. Instead, *performance* is expressive of the conventions, discourses, that have produced, say, gender, racial, or sexual identities. This is, as Butler puts it in connection with the imitative structure of gender, "an imitation without an origin" (*Gender Trouble* 138). What precedes the *performance* of identity, then, is not some originary essence but the set of norms and traditions that have produced those particular identities and that will be reiterated. Moreover, *performances* are also expressive of the speaker's intention to ground discourse in a particular tradition and convention. As Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels put it, "[c]onventions are indeed important . . . because they often provide convenient ways of signaling what you intend" ("Against Theory 2" 66).

When the subject is produced through *performance*, we may note an adherence to existing scripts that regulate behavior by assigning it to the function called normal. Such *performances* are generated, as I pointed out earlier, in processes much like Althusserian interpellation: when the subject is produced by being "interpellated" by some powerful ideology; somewhat like responding to the "hey, you" call of the policeman, the person's identity of being performatively produced as the addressee, the "you," of the call. In this "reinscription of normative identities," to borrow Jeffrey T. Nealon's apt phrase, the subject becomes the immediate "product of interpellating codes" (79). For example, children's literature is one of the obvious vehicles for the ideology that interpellate women and men in order to produce them. Indeed, such tales as "The Sleeping Beauty," "Cinderella," or "Snow White," offering narratives of domesticity, feminine desirability, passivity, and aesthetic objectification, have participated in subjecting women to traditional gender norms (see, for example, Donald Hall and Edit Zsadányi ["Hamupipőke"] on this topic). All the while the subject holds on to the illusion of freedom, the illusion of "submitting freely" to ideology—quite like John Winthrop insisted, according to Linda K. Kerber, that the colonists follow the model of women in marriage when submitting "freely" to the state ("Can a Woman").

These are *performances* of social scenarios, handed down by conventions, both social and linguistic, regulating the individual to construct himself or herself in conformity to conventions. The force of these scenarios come not from the authority of the speakers but from the institution or convention itself; as Steven

Winspur remarks, in such cases when “forms of language transcend their users” (170), authority lies in “the structures of convention that make up the performative contracts in which we engage” (171). Yet the role of the speaker is significant too, for the force of the utterance depends on the person’s participation in the group of people who accept that particular convention. These groups are Derrida’s “Limited Inc”—“societies which are (more or less) anonymous, with limited responsibility or liability (“Limited Inc abc” 216). Such are, for example, “betting companies” that enable their participants to make bets.

Of course, theatricality—or the repetition of certain formulae and scripts (such as “I pronounce you man and wife,” “We declare independence”)—is very much part of this expressive-replaying performance. But such a dramatic *performance* goes beyond the “inbuilt theatricality” (Winspur 177) of performativity: here, in instances of subjectivity *performances*, for example, it is not just formulae that are being cited, but whole discourses—in the Foucauldian sense, that is, discourses of patriarchy, racism, or homophobia, among others—can act as normative scripts that regulate behavior. The context of *performance* is permeated—or, to use Derrida’s term, saturated (“Signature” 174)—by conventions and ideologies. To apply Hillis Miller’s understanding of the mathematical meaning of the French word *saturé*, it has absorbed to its full certain substances and their properties (*Speech Acts* 100), in this case, conventions and presuppositions of discourses that the *performance* cites in a theatrical manner.

In this sense all such *performances* are versions of the masquerade, or the interaction of mask, costume, and convention described by Joan Rivière as early as 1929 in connection with gender; in this vein, womanliness is nothing more than its playing out, or masquerade (38). These instances of dramatic *performance* as the citing and playing out of scripts are all “parasitic,” in the Derridian sense, leaning on existing norms and taking off from earlier *performances*. The claim about the parasitic nature of all *performances* support the argument made by Barbara Johnson about the role-playing nature of all performative acts having undermined the distinction set up by Austin and Searle between “parasitic” and “real” performatives (*Critical Difference* 60–66). It also supports, of course, Derrida’s original argument articulated in his debate with Searle, where he does not only question the “binding power” of intention, but insists that the general iterability of the performative renders all speech acts “parasitic” and non-serious—a feature presented as anomaly by Austin (“Signature” 191). For Derrida, of course, as Bálint Rozsnyai has rightly claimed, iterability belongs to the nature of language itself, which makes it impossible to even distinguish between “parasitic” and “non-parasitic” utterances (173). Given the cohesion of traditions and norms generating *performances*, the iterable character of the subjectivities performed will confine them to single identities:

one rather than multiple inflections will dominate performances, and these inflections will be fixed and stable, rather than mobile and moving.

(ii) My ontological or radical performative is quite different. Here new discursive entities come about against or in the absence of existing ideologies, discourses, or conventions; the assigned subjectivity is unintended by power. The subjectivities performed will be multiple, unfixed, unstable, mobile, and mutable—much like the “new *mestiza* consciousness” described by Gloria Anzaldúa (99–113)—allowing for a new possibility of agency. If performance was described as expressive, one that reproduces the ruling ideology, the performative, indeed, challenges the ruling ideology. When subjectivities are being performatively constructed, for example, figurations of new subjectivity will come about which typically involve transgressions and extensions of categories. For example, the formerly disempowered will assume agency by resisting normativity and undermining the individualizing-normalizing-hierarchizing effects of power. In such cases, the subject does not come about via being interpellated by ideology, but instead by resisting this interpellation and resisting the normative codes of thought and behavior—by enacting a rupture from convention. Indeed, the difference lies, as Butler points out, in being acted upon by ideology as opposed being, in the case of the ontological performative, enacted by and into: “[p]ower not only acts on a subject but, in a transitive sense, enacts the subject into being” (*Psychic* 13; emphasis in original). This new discursive entity corresponds to Derrida’s new kind of performative: “the originary performativity that does not conform to *pre-existing* conventions, unlike all the performatives analyzed by the theoreticians of speech acts, but whose force of *rupture* produces the institution or the constitution, the law itself, which is to say also the meaning that appears to, that ought to, or that appears to have to guarantee it in return” (*Specters* 36–37; emphasis in original). For example, The Declaration of Independence is such an originary performative in that the signatories broke existing laws and created instead the law by which they enacted and created themselves and those on whose behalf they acted (the American people). Such a radical performative has a radically inaugural quality because, Hillis Miller explains, here “each performative utterance to some degree creates its own conditions and laws. It transforms the context into which it enters” (*Speech Acts* 96).

As all performatives, this narrower category of the performative also relies on repetition, quotation, or citation, only this is a special case of repetition, quotation, or citation: this is quoting with a difference, discarding the previously coded script, ignoring the pre-established formulae, and replacing the earlier context with a new one. Subjectivity (in the narrow sense of grammatical subject and agent) happens when the person is capable of quoting with a difference, when the speaker is allowed self-construction without or in spite of existing conventions. This is the moment in which, as Butler puts it, “a subject—a person,

a collective—asserts a right or entitlement to a livable life when no such prior authorization exists, when no clearly enabling convention is in place” (*Undoing* 224). This is the possibility of agency acceptable for poststructuralist theories as well, captured by Butler’s phrase quoted earlier, “the assumption of a purpose *unintended* by power” (*Psychic Life* 15; emphasis in original). This radical *performative* grows out of a context that is “never absolutely determinable” (Derrida, “Signature” 174) but indeterminable because it is, to use another Derridian word, “non-saturated” (“Signature” 174); in fact, it is born as a response to the *performance* engendered by a fully saturated context.

Given the contradiction I pointed out earlier within the specific meaning of the word *subject* as (i) grammatical subject and agent acting on his/her own right and (ii) someone subjected to power, subjectivation will have two meanings as well: (i) the making of a subject as subject in terms of grammar and agency and (ii) the making of the subject as one subjected to and then resisting this power. Performativity brings these two aspects together when allowing the speaker to act as grammatical subject and agent and by allowing the speaker to resist subjection conveyed by language. There is only one thing the speaker is not allowed: to not be produced by language. For while it is customary to compare linguistic rules to the rules of chess or football, Loxley is right in insisting that in language “we could never actually step off the football field” (39). Indeed, the speaking subject does not have the power to step off, *metaleptically*, the football field of language.

Performativity of reading and writing

Literature, I want to suggest, is the privileged site of discursive practices because here the *performative*—whether its expressive or replaying form, *performance* or its ontological form, *performative*—establishes itself both in the act of writing and in the act of reading. In the first case the speech act is being performed by the text, accounting for certain acts or deeds that go beyond the textual, while in the latter it is the reader who brings about meanings.

Writing can be considered *performative* because here certain states of affairs come about, having an existence in the text yet affecting our emotions outside or beyond the text, in the real (spatial-temporal) world. Autobiography, where a person creates herself or himself as subject or agent, is a typical *performative* genre of subject creation. The fictional comes to life in the sense that the reader starts to think about fictional events and characters as if they were all real. Indeed, fictional characters can become real, at least to the degree that we as readers indeed start to think and feel about them as if they were real. Literature can cross that line which William James draws between “imagining a thing and believing in its existence, between supposing a proposition and acquiescing its truth” (*Principles* 283). In the latter case, James continues, the object is not only

apprehended by the mind, but is “held to have reality”: these are “our *living* realities” (283; emphasis in original). Literature can transcend the fictional context, allowing the reader to contemplate fictional events as if they were real because they awaken real feelings and real emotions in the readers.

Reading and interpretation can also be understood as performative. In this case it is the reader or interpreter who performs the speech act whereby a new reading is created. Or, put differently, the speech act is being performed by the act of reading. During this speech act performed by the reader, knowledge or cognition is being created, where meaning is not deciphered, but followed, or rather allowed to emerge. New meanings can emerge because the text is not a smooth homogenous surface, but one full of gaps and ruptures: it has, to use Barbara Johnson’s term, “way[s] of differing from itself” (*Critical Difference* 4). The reader is to respond to these differences within “by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself” (5). The reader ceases to be an object on which the text acts, but emerges as a subject who enters into dialogue with the text. This is, Derrida claims, “performative interpretation,” “an interpretation that transforms the very thing it interprets [*qui transforme cela même qu’elle interprète*]” (*Speceters* 51).

In this framework the reader emerges as the “Author” of the text, where through the performative production of reading, reading becomes “writing.” As Barthes insists in “The Death of the Author,”

[t]he fact is (or, it follows) that *writing* can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, ‘depiction’ (as the Classics would say); rather, it designates what linguists, referring to Oxford philosophy, call performative, a rare verbal form . . . in which the enunciation has no other content (contains no other proposition) than the act by which it is uttered. . . . (1468)

Reading is, then, performative also in the sense that here it is the text that acts on us as readers, and the very difference, or space, between the two functions of the performative, the citing and the self-production, is what actually seems to perform us as writers.

In the past two or three decades, American literary studies have produced a whole range of revisionary readings of well-known canonical texts. In this process, certain literary pieces, especially prose, which previously had received interpretations now gained new readings, and these new readings have since become widely accepted too. What is most fascinating here is that these new readings seem to be taken for granted as much as contrary, or at least very different, readings were before. What is it that triggers revisionist readings of a literary canon, and what is it that can overwrite or nullify previously current readings, which were considered as obvious at their time as the new readings are today?

For example, Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle" and "In the Cage" make perfect sense to us today as gay narratives, even though for decades they made perfect sense as narratives with heterosexual plots. Indeed, the James text, it seems, as Mihály Szegedy-Maszák aptly puts it, is incessantly rewriting itself („Önértelmezés" 19). What has changed, among other things, during this re-writing process is the legitimization of homosexual desire. A related reason is that today we tend more easily to cross boundaries between the homosocial and the homosexual, a distinction introduced by Sedgwick as referring to male bonding as a social force, on the one hand, and same-sex desire as sexual force, on the other (*Between Men*). This ease in crossing boundaries allows such canonical American texts as *Leaves of Grass*, *Huck Finn*, *Moby Dick*, *Walden*, *Billy Budd*, or "Rip Van Winkle" to be read as having gay subtexts today. Also, readers have developed a refined hearing towards gay topics: homosexuality has perhaps become the most obvious kind of secret we identify in texts that supposedly refuse to reveal their secrets.

Could James have foreseen this? If iteration indeed means, as Hillis Miller insists, that "you can never be sure that you mean what you intend to mean or mean to say" (*Speech Acts* 68), then did James not bring this possibility, of a gay reading, on himself by employing certain conventions that were just being constructed at the time he wrote these pieces? Was he a cooperative communicator? Did he want us to "get" his story even in the radical absence of the sender? Indeed, is this *the* way to get it? Is the performative force, influenced by traces of later cultural contexts, identical with his intention? Do such examples support the premise of contemporary theory: that indeed texts do not know themselves? Are we faced with the aporias, fissures, and gaps—the unsaid—of a text, or are we reading works along meanings which were not intended at all? Are these cases of "intentionless meanings"—or are Stephen Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels right when they so strongly insist that this is not even a possibility (see their "Against Theory," "Pragmatism," "Against Theory 2")? Would James have written another story had he been able to anticipate this late 20th century blooming of gay readerly sensibility? Could he have excluded this possibility even if he had wanted to? In other words, did the dialogue of his anticipation extend to over a hundred years? Or did it simply take a hundred years until the perlocutionary act of convincing took force?

To answer these questions, I would like to make a detour now to the concept of the presupposition in order to be able to ground my further discussion of literary interpretation, and especially revisionary readings, in the dynamic interaction between performative processes and the presupposition.

Presupposition

Presuppositions make up a large part of communicative context, the context that shapes or even determines the meaning of verbal signs (see Sebeok 10ff). They reside in the background, so to speak, forming that body of knowledge which the ideal or idealized reader is expected to have. Moreover, their truth is also taken for granted in order for the utterance to have truth-value. Within speech act framework, the context can be defined as those constitutive and regulatory rules and those presuppositional statements whose satisfaction (of the rules) and truth (of the presuppositions) allow certain utterances count as particular speech acts. Presuppositions, Searle insists, must be defined contextually: “an expression *a* presupposes an expression *b* if an only if in order for *a* to be true or false of an object *X*, *b* must be true of *X*” (*Speech Acts* 126). Put another way, an utterance is the felicitous performance of a speech act only in the context where its presuppositions hold true.

Originally introduced by Gottlob Frege in 1892 (although traced by some theoretician back to the tracts entitled *Summulae Logicales* of the medieval philosopher, later to become pope, Petrus Hispanus [see Beaver 3]), the presupposition was first located around proper names. Assertions using proper names, Frege insisted, must rely on the presupposition that proper names have a reference (“On Sense”). Frege’s famous example, used by Bertrand Russell too (in “On Denoting”), for this existential presupposition, or more precisely, when a sentence lacks its presuppositional referent, is the sentence “The King of France is bald.” Uttered at a time when France has no king, the sentence lacks its presuppositional referent, therefore this statement can be neither true nor false. For Frege, the fact that denotation is conditional upon the satisfaction of presuppositions constitutes an unfortunate imperfection of natural language (on this topic see Beaver 7).

Austin adopted this Fregean understanding of the presupposition, suggesting that presuppositions are parts of the felicity conditions of references. The assertion “John’s children are all bald” is infelicitous if it is devoid of reference, that is, if John has no children (*How To Do* 50). In other words, the statement presupposes “the existence of that which it refers to” (*How To Do* 136).

Another element of the definition of presupposition is that it remains constant under negation. In other words, the presupposition is unaffected by whether its higher statement (which it is the presupposition of) is in the form of an assertion, a negation, or question. In one of Frege’s original examples, whether we take the assertion, “After the separation of Schleswig-Holstein from Denmark, Prussia and Austria quarreled,” or its negation, “After the separation of Schleswig-Holstein from Denmark, Prussia and Austria did not quarrel,” the presupposition—“Schleswig-Holstein was once separated from Denmark”—remains constant (“On Sense”).

The concept gained wider currency through the writings of Peter F. Strawson, who linked the presupposition to statements (not sentences), and emphasized the truth of the presupposition as precondition for the truth or falsity of the statement (*Introduction*). Strawson defined the presupposition as the precondition of the truth or falsity of a statement; as a background assumption that is taken for granted in order for the foregrounded assertion to make sense (“On Referring”). Another philosopher, Wilfrid Sellars understood the presuppositional statement as being part of the assertion made, a part equal to the assertion itself. Giving the example of the sentence “Harry has stopped beating his grandmother,” Sellars insisted that two equally important assertions are being made here simultaneously: one in the presupposition (“Harry once beat his grandmother”) and the other in the assertive sentence itself (“He no longer does so”) (“Presupposing”).

Charles Fillmore has claimed that the meaning of a sentence is made up of what the sentence poses, on the one hand, and what it presupposes, on the other (“Frames”). These are (i) the meaning proper of words and (ii) the meaning that the uses of the words presuppose. Giving the example of the word *bachelor*, “having never been married” is part of the meaning proper, he suggests, while “being human, male, and adult” is contained in the presupposition (“Types”). He insists that the explicit, or illocutionary, level of communication constantly interacts with the implicit, or presuppositional, level (“Verbs of Judging”). Elsewhere Fillmore claims that presuppositions are conditions which must be satisfied before the speech act is made: a question is asked, a command is given, a feeling is expressed (“Types”). Among the conditions to be satisfied before uttering the sentence “Please open the door,” for example, he lists questions of good faith in speech communication (such as understanding English, being awake and not totally paralyzed), having a specific door around, and having this door closed. Fillmore posits that presuppositions act as conditions necessary for the performance of illocutionary acts, thereby linking them to the felicity conditions of speech acts. In this framework, presuppositions are conditions of felicitous performances.

Presupposition and the (performative) production of meaning

Performatives are fundamentally linked to presuppositions in that they rely on presuppositions when quoting and evoking structures of conventions, cultural narratives, and other pre-texts forming the context of performative processes. Their interaction resides in the fact that presuppositions are revisable, rewritable, or modifiable (unlike the performative, which is ultimately act). As pre-texts, then, presuppositions set the boundaries of interpretation or misinterpretation of texts. They form the basis of dialogue between author/text and reader; moreover, they are what might change as a consequence of the dialogic encounter.

Presuppositions, I want to insist, play a role in allowing the experience of the reader to enter the text: through the different assumptions, cultural narratives, pre-texts, and pre-scripts each reader brings to the reading experience; they are manifest in how texts interact with other texts the reader read earlier. Presuppositions help explain how the reader understands or misunderstands a text, as for example Henry James's, by being manipulated by context early on. I think Annette Kolodny has presuppositions in mind when she speaks about the paradigms readers activate while reading, claiming, "[i]nsofar as we are taught how to read, what we engage are not texts but paradigms." "We appropriate meaning from a text," Kolodny goes on, "according to what we need (or desire) or, in other words, according to the critical assumptions or predispositions (conscious or not) that we bring to it. And we appropriate different meanings, or report different gleanings, at different times—even from the same text—according to our changed assumptions, circumstances, and requirements" ("Dancing" 153).

Presuppositions provoke important questions about the possibility of understanding: to what degree is perception and understanding possible? To what degree can we understand each other or literary texts? What are the cultural barriers in understanding? Is Henry Adams right in claiming, in "The Dynamo and the Virgin," that "[o]ne sees what one brings" (*Education* 387)?

I would like to suggest that presuppositions are helpful in identifying the relationship between what "one brings" and what "one sees," on the one hand, and, on the other, in tracing how what "one brings" gets revised or shattered by the dialogue between text and reader. For reading powerful literary texts will very often result in a change of the reader's original frames and assumptions (what "one brings"), ultimately resulting in changing what "one sees" too.

Interpretive decisions, however, are not arbitrary: they depend exactly on what "one brings" to the text: on our presuppositions. In a significant way, presuppositions decide our interpretive decisions about texts with an aporia, texts with contradictory yet equally valid interpretations. Henry James is, of course, a master of aporia resulting from the reader's entertaining of competing interpretations. As is known, *The Turn of the Screw* can be read both as a ghost story and as a story about a woman's hallucination; by the same token, it is equally valid to read "The Beast in the Jungle" as the story of heterosexual and homosexual desire. James resists grounding his discourse in one particular direction or evoking one particular reading in these texts. The presuppositions we bring to texts determine how we perform interpretation. These presuppositions are as much personal (dependent on our particular cognitive abilities [perceiving discourse markers, for example], mental skills, life experiences, reading experiences, education, individual disposition) as they are cultural (dependent on the social and cultural context whose products we each are; depending on the degree we are, knowingly or unknowingly, embedded in the culture and society

surrounding us). In an extreme case, when the interaction of context with text is disregarded, this means that our presuppositions pre-determine our readings: already before we engage in reading a text, our assumptions that exist independent of the text will set the direction that our interpretation might take.

Presuppositions seem to play a significant role indeed in how meanings are produced by both writer and reader. This production of meaning is ultimately dialogic in at least three senses. First, as I pointed out in the previous paragraphs, the reader's assumptions brought to the text determine reading and interpretation. In this sense every critical-interpretive response is dialogic. Second, writing itself is already dialogic. For any writing assumes the possibility of dialogue: writers want to make a difference, to make a statement, to change minds, or at least to leave a mark in the world of texts. So even before a real readerly or critical response is given, the act of writing engages in a dialogue when anticipating a response. According to Bakhtin, given language's addressivity, the utterance is prestructured by the orientation of the writer or speaker toward the listener's response: the composition and the style of the utterance "depend on those to whom the utterance is addressed, how the speaker (or writer) senses and imagines his addressees, and the force of their effect on the utterance" (*Speech Genres* 95). It is also based on previous dialogue, the "already spoken," where the knowledge of this previous exchange allows the speaker to project the expectation of what the listener may reply:

The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction. Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. Such is the situation in any living dialogue. ("Discourse" 280)

Bakhtinian addressivity is related to the issue termed by Jacob L. Mey as the ownership of language: "my utterance, in its final analysis, receives its meaning not only from what I put into it, but to an equally high degree from what the others get out of it" (*When Voices* 236). Words uttered in the absence of another person are meaningless; language that does not address an actual addressee is empty of meaning. Language is dialogic not only because it serves as the medium of interpersonal dialogue, but also because meaning and understanding depend on reciprocity. Once uttered, the words become "public domain," and as such are owned equally by speakers and addressees. "The word cannot be assigned to a single speaker," Mey cites Bakhtin.

The author (speaker) has his own inalienable right to the word, but the listener also has his rights, and those whose voices are heard in the word before the author comes upon it have their rights (after all, there are no words that belong to no one). (Bakhtin, *Speech Genres* 21–22)

The word is, therefore, to use another Bakhtinian term, “interindividual” (*Speech Genres* 21): it is not owned by any one individual but is shared jointly among individuals.

Third, the force of the performative derives from its “conforming with an iterable model,” to quote Derrida (“Signature” 191). “We may make the speech act come alive,” Mey suggests, “by continually varying the context and expanding it to suit our communicative purposes” (*Pragmatics* 111). Iterability, when speech acts are being reused or redeployed in different contexts, is also a form of dialogism: here speech acts enact an interplay with earlier speech situations, allowing the text to carry the traces of earlier contexts. Citationality and iterability characterize language in general, of course, but in the case of the performative they seem to ride piggy-back on convention and conventional discourse.

* * *

In the rest of this book I will focus on how subjectivities are produced in the literary text along the multiple and intersecting axes of gender, race, and sexuality—whether through expressive-replaying *performance* or the radical-ontological *performative*. I will investigate texts that present (i) theatrical *performance* processes to construct, via obeying ruling ideologies, persons either as objects—as powerless Others (these are *performances* of women, persons of color, and gay persons)—or subjects, as members of the hegemonic social groups (men, white, and straight persons), covered by the dominant elements of the dichotomies, and those that present (ii) *performative* processes to reconstruct, via resisting the ruling ideologies, the identity of those powerless and marginalized Others into speaking subjects and empowered agents. I will establish links, that is, between (i) object or subject positions on the one hand and (ii) the performance or non-performance of normative scripts on the other. Moreover, I will make connections between the respective social scripts of *performance* and *performative* processes and the readerly presuppositions, and show how their interaction might account for new performative readings.