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Performativity$_1$/Performativity$_2$

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The central point of a paper on performativity I gave some years ago at a conference in Oslo was to argue that an equivocation exists in this word and that this double meaning has caused some intellectual confusion.[1] I call the two meanings of "performativity," performativity sub one and performativity sub two. The confusion has led some scholars in performance studies, especially, perhaps, those in feminist performance studies, to accept an intellectual lineage that goes from J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things With Words* (1980, first published

1 A much-extended version of this discussion, one that gives a fuller account of the complexity of Judith Butler's thought, appears in chapter 7 of my recent *For Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009). I have incorporated several paragraphs from this extended discussion later on in this essay. The discussion of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* in this essay also appears in a somewhat different form in *For Derrida*. Used with permission by Fordham University Press. The original discussion of the two performativities was prepared for a conference at the University of Oslo and was subsequently published, in a form different from this essay, as "Performativity as Performance/Performativity as Speech Act: Derrida's Special Theory of Performativity" (Miller 2007).

in 1962), to Jacques Derrida's *Limited Inc* (1988; the two main essays in this book were originally published in 1972 and 1977), to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (2006, originally published in 1990), to performance studies of various sorts in dance, music, theater, and everyday life. Here is part of what *Wikipedia* says about "performance studies." I cite *Wikipedia* as a good example of informed academic opinion:

> An alternative origin narrative [for "performance studies"] stresses the development of speech-act theory by philosophers J.L. Austin and Judith Butler and literary critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Performance studies has also had a strong relationship to the fields of feminism, psychoanalysis, and queer theory. Theorists like Peggy Phelan, Butler, Sedgwick, José Esteban Muñoz, Rebecca Schneider, and André Lepecki have been equally influential in both performance studies and these related fields. Performance studies incorporates theories of drama, dance, art, anthropology, folkloristics, philosophy, cultural studies, sociology, and more and more, music performance (Anon. "Performance Studies". *Wikipedia*. Accessed January 24, 2009).

Here is part of *Wikipedia*'s account of Butler's early and still highly influential book:

> The crux of Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble* is that the coherence of the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality – the natural-seeming coherence, for example, of masculine gender and heterosexual desire in male bodies – is culturally constructed through the repetition of stylized acts in time. These stylized bodily acts, in their repetition, establish the appearance of an essential, ontological "core" gender. This is the sense in which Butler famously theorizes gender, along with sex and sexuality, as performative.... The concept of performativity is at the core of Butler's work. It extends beyond the doing of gender and can be understood as a full-fledged theory of subjectivity. Indeed, if her more recent books have shifted focus away from gender, they still treat performativity as theoretically central (Anon. "Judith Butler". *Wikipedia*. Accessed January 24, 2009).

This lineage, I hold, is problematic. I have no quarrel with Butler's idea that gender is constructed by the coerced repetition of socially approved gender roles, though I think one needs to think a little about her extremely influential ideas before accepting them outright. Moreover, her theories of selfhood are subtle and have changed over time, from the early *Gender Trouble* on. Butler's theory is oddly ambivalent. On the one hand, she holds, gender and selfhood generally are not innate. We are born blank slates. That means we could be different from what we have become. That's a cheerful hypothesis, though a little unsettling in its implication that we are not ever really anybody, just a role we have adopted or have been forced to adopt. On the other hand, Butler holds that the force of socially iterated repressive imposed roles is so great that they are extremely difficult to resist. That's a gloomy hypothesis. Perhaps, however, the strength and appeal of the Butlerian theory lies in this doubleness.

The mistake lies in claiming direct support for this in Austin or Derrida, though I think Althusserian "interpellation" can perhaps be legitimately claimed as an antecedent. It is not unlikely that Butler at some point read Louis Althusser's influential "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)." That essay argues that we are called or "interpellated" to be this or that self by various institutional forces: family, church, school, the police, and so on. Althusser's famous example is "the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!'" (Althusser 1972: 174). Unless we want something bad to happen to us, we respond to such interpellation with some version of Abraham's response to Jehovah's hailing him in the Abraham and Isaac story in the Old Testament: "Here am I" (Genesis 22: 11). As Althusser says: "all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects" (Althusser 1972: 173). Butler does pay explicit homage in *Gender Trouble* to

Michel Foucault's somewhat similar ideas as an important influence on her thinking.

Austin, however, did not mean anything much like Butler's "performativity" by what he called "performatives". An Austinian performative (performativity sub one) is a mode of speech act that is a way of using words to make something happen, as in the minister's "I now pronounce you man and wife". This formula, uttered by the right person in the right circumstances, brings it about that the couple are married. The sentence exists in various forms in different denominations and times. Austin's "felicitous" performatives presuppose a pre-existing fixed and stable selfhood (the self that says "*I* pronounce", or "*I* promise") as well as fixed rules and conventions, firmly in place, that determine which performatives are going to work to do something with words. Austin is for law and order. He wants to make sure that when the judge says, "I sentence you to be hanged by the neck until dead", the sentence is really carried out and seems a just verdict, reached by proper legal procedures. Austin explicitly disqualifies performance in the sense of playing a role. In order for a performative utterance to be felicitous, he says firmly, I must not be acting on the stage or writing a poem or speaking in soliloquy (Austin 1980: 22). Becoming another gender by appearing in drag and "performing" another gender is foreign to Austin's thought.

By "iterability", moreover, Derrida, in his critique of Austin, means that performative enunciations such as "I christen thee" or "I pronounce you man and wife" or "I sentence you ..." have as a feature of their "felicity" that they may be used over and over and in many different social contexts, including odd and anomalous ones. Derrida wants to break down Austin's distinction between felicitous and infelicitous speech acts, as well as Austin's claim that the context can be "saturated". Austin himself in various ways eventually

puts his initially firm distinctions and definitions in question. Derrida's "iterability" is foreign to Butler's notion that social repressive iteration makes me think, mistakenly, that I have a pre-existing stable and fixed gender. "Iterability" is used in two different ways in the two cases. The mistake sometimes (I don't say always) made by those in "performance studies" is to confuse two quite different things: performance as in "She performed Ophelia" or "He performed a Mozart sonata" (performativity sub two); and a performative speech act, as in "I pronounce you man and wife" (performativity sub one).

To sum up, at this point in my essay, I could state matters this way, relating to the key concepts of *repetition* and/or *iterability* – concepts that figure in one form or another in Austin, Butler and Derrida:

Austin's performatives need to be repeatable. They require the idea of a stable selfhood or identity, as well as fixed rules or conventions within contexts that he believes can be "saturated", securing the "uptake" of (felicitous) performatives. Austin's repetitions, were they at all theoretically and practicably feasible, would, despite their alleged changing, doing or making something by words, be *repetitions of sameness and identity* as far as selfhood, contexts, and normative rules are concerned.

Butler's ideas of selfhood, gender and identity cut two ways: they are held to be fictions resulting on the one hand from the force of socially iterated, repressive and imposed roles that, on the other hand, might be counteracted in alternative roles as the (potentially liberating) construction over time of gender and selfhood through the repetition of stylized bodily acts, linguistic, societal and other behavioural patterns in any context. Such constructed selfhoods would also relate to the *iteration of sameness and "identity"*, but now as constructed, fictitious entities based on coerced or liberating role-play, on acts.

Derrida's performatives can be repeated in any contexts, including what Austin thinks of as "anomalous" contexts. They undo the idea of felicity or infelicity as well as the idea of saturation of contexts. They include any performative utterance, also Austinian anomalies, etiolations and parasitical ones. Importantly, they also disqualify the requirement of the self-conscious ego and any presence of intentions. In Derrida, the performative is seen as a response made to a demand made on me by the "wholly other" [*le tout autre*], a response that, far from depending on pre-existing rules or laws, on a pre-existing ego, I, or self, or on pre-existing circumstances or "context," *creates* the self, the context, and new rules or laws. Derridean performatives are essentially linked to his special concept of time as "out of joint," as *différance*. A Derridean performative creates an absolute rupture between the present and the past. It inaugurates a future that Derrida calls a future anterior, or an unpredictable "à-venir," as in Derrida's iterated phrase in his late work: "*la démocratie à venir*," the democracy to come. My response to the call made on me is essentially a reciprocal performative saying "yes" to a performative demand issued initially by the wholly other. My "yes" is a performative countersigning or validating a performative command that comes from outside me. In this sense the iterability of *Derridean performatives are repetitions in différance*. They inaugurate differences in time, space, matter, culture, and subjectivites.

A full account of Butler's theory of performativity would take many pages. Her ideas have changed over the years and are still evolving. I am, moreover, interested as much in what readers have made of Butler's thinking as in what she actually says. These may differ considerably. I have taken the *Wikipedia* entries on Judith Butler and on performativity and performance studies as good indications of received opinion. *Gender Trouble* has done much good in the world. It has

done good by persuasively putting in question "normative" binary heterosexuality and thereby making a space for gay and lesbian sexuality and gender. Butler's primary target in *Gender Trouble* is not just habitual notions that sex and gender are innate, natural, unalterable, but, more specifically, the dependence of the feminism current in 1990 on just those ideas of normative heterosexuality that it ought to have contested. Feminism's acceptance of heterosexuality led it to exclude gays and lesbians from the "real" and the "intelligible", almost as violently as did (and still does) the hegemony of primarily straight male social and legal power. Butler contests the reigning ideology of sex and gender by tirelessly, patiently, with passion, and with much nuance arguing that sex and gender are not natural, biological, innate, and pre-existent, but that they are the violent product of iterated discursive formations that sequester as unnatural and "unreal" sexual and gender minorities in their considerable variation:

> Juridical power inevitably "produces" what it claims merely to represent; hence, politics must be concerned with this dual function of power: the juridical and the productive. In effect, the law produces and then conceals the notion of "a subject before the law" in order to invoke that discursive formation as a naturalized foundational premise that subsequently legitimates that law's own regulatory hegemony (Butler 2006: 3).

Butler begins, in an important paragraph in the preface to the reissue of *Gender Trouble* in 1999, by making overt the way *performativity*, a relatively infrequent word in *Gender Trouble*, has in subsequent years become the central focus of the book's influence. It is, moreover, Butler says, a topic she has turned to again and again in subsequent work, in a constant process of modification. "Much of my work in recent years," says Butler,

> has been devoted to clarifying and revising the theory of performativity that is outlined in *Gender Trouble*. It is difficult to say precisely what performativity is not only because my own views on what "performativity" might mean have changed over time, most often in response to excellent criticisms, but because so many others have taken it up and given it their own formulations (Butler 2006: xv).

"*Performativity*" was a word whose time had come, like the word "*deconstruction*," and, like "*deconstruction*," it has come to mean whatever people "formulate" it to mean or use it to mean to say, including the different meanings over time that a given theorist, such as Butler, ascribes to it. Another example, as I have indicated, is the use of the word "performativity" in the discipline of Performance Studies. Though Butler uses the words "*performance*" and "*theatricality*" in *Gender Trouble*, she nowhere mentions Performance Studies, just as she does not mention Lyotard's frequent prior use of the word "*performativity*" in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979; 1984). It may be that Butler independently invented the word and a version of its concept, even though others had already used it. Butler's *Excitable Speech* (1997) makes much more overt use of speech act theory, that is, performativity sub one.

The preface of 1999 to *Gender Trouble* is to a considerable degree an attempt to explain just what Butler means by "*performativity*". The word appears over and over in that preface. The conflation of performativity sub one and performativity sub two is present in many of Butler's formulations, as when she says, "As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an 'act', as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of 'the natural' that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status" (Butler 2006: 200). The phrase "*as* it were" indicates a wavering that is

explicitly and somewhat uneasily acknowledged in the preface of 1999, under the name "*waffle*":

> *Gender Trouble* sometimes reads as if gender is simply a self-invention or that the psychic meaning of a gendered presentation might be read directly off its surface. Both of these postulates have had to be refined over time. Moreover, my theory sometimes waffles between understanding performativity as linguistic and casting it as theatrical (Butler 2006: xxvi).

Having posed a distinction between what I have been calling performativity sub one and performativity sub two, and confessed to having waffled about that distinction, Butler goes on immediately to take back with one hand what she has offered with the other. She does this by way of a claim that a linguistic speech act and a theatrical performance are always related, "chiasmically," though what she says hardly supports the claim that one is the crisscross reversal of the other, which is what a chiasmus is:

> I have come to think that the two are invariably related, chiasmically so, and that a reconsideration of the speech act as an instance of power invariably draws attention to both its theatrical and linguistic dimensions. In *Excitable Speech*, I sought to show that the speech act is at once performed (and thus theatrical, presented to an audience, subject to interpretation), and linguistic, inducing a set of effects through its implied relation to linguistic conventions (Butler 2006: xxvi–xxvii).

The two kinds of performativity are then superimposed once more in the next sentences, and not in the crisscross of a chiasmus:

> If one wonders how a linguistic theory of the speech act relates to bodily gestures, one need only consider that speech itself is a bodily act with

specific linguistic consequences. Thus speech belongs exclusively neither to corporeal presentation nor to language, and its status as word and deed is necessarily ambiguous. This ambiguity has consequences for the practice of coming out, for the insurrectionary power of the speech act, for language as a condition of both bodily seduction and the threat of injury (Butler 2006: xxvii).

It is true that language always has some form of embodiment, whether as inky marks on the page of my copy of *Gender Trouble* or as the sounds I breathe forth when I speak, accompanying my speech, perhaps, with significant gestures. It is also true that Austin allows that a bodily gesture, such as a judge donning a black hood to condemn a criminal to be hanged, can substitute for a literal speech act such as "I sentence you to be hanged by the neck until dead." The materiality of language, however, is an exceedingly peculiar kind of non-material materiality, as Derrida, Paul de Man, and others have in different ways argued.[2] The relation of spoken language to bodily gestures hardly supports the asser-

2 For a collection of essays primarily on de Man's concepts of materiality, see *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory* (Cohen *et al.* 2001). This volume contains Judith Butler's essay on the relation of the body to language, by way of a discussion of Descartes's *Meditations*, "How Can I Deny That These Hands and This Body Are Mine" (Cohen *et al.* 2001: 254-73), as well as Jacques Derrida's essay on, among other things, de Man's "materiality without matter," "Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2) ('within such limits')" (Cohen *et al.* 2001: 277-360). Both essays would merit extensive discussion, especially when they are set side by side. "The Body" is of course a major topic in recent feminist studies and in cultural studies. A search on 12/21/2008 of the keywords "body, politics" in "melvyl.worldcat.org" turned up "about 5,385" books and articles, with titles like *Body Politics in Paradise Lost* or *The Female Body and the Law*, in inexhaustible permutations. Butler somewhere reports that women in her audiences have often asked, "What about the materiality of the body, Judy?" A book by Butler much subsequent to *Gender Trouble, Bodies That Matter: On the*

tion that the theatrical and the linguistic are "always related," even chiasmically. A given speech act can go on functioning performatively in an infinite variety of material embodiments and circumstances, including many that are not in any direct way incarnated in a human body, for example in a signed declaration such as a mortgage agreement. A speech act is not limited, as Austin knew, to spoken language. The signature may have been the result of a bodily act, but once it is inscribed on paper it goes on working in unpredictably different contexts, for example when the mortgage is cut up into "tranches" by a computer program and then eventually those pieces, or some of them, are part of a credit default swap that helps bring about global financial meltdown when I default on the mortgage.

Daniel Deronda *as fictional example*

I shall exemplify the difference between performativity sub one and performativity sub two by way of two passages in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, first published in 1876: in one passage, Daniel promises to carry on Mordecai's work after the latter's death: "Everything I can in conscience do to make your life effective I will do" (Eliot 1986: 600). This echoes an earlier promise Daniel makes to Mordecai: "I will be faithful" (Eliot 1986: 564). Both these statements are in all strictness forms of the speech act Austin calls a "performative," performativity sub one, except that they appear in a work of fiction. No real Daniel Deronda ever existed to say, "I promise." Deronda's fictional utterances are hypothetical examples of how to do things with words. What do they

Discursive Limits of "Sex" (1993), focuses, as its introduction begins by saying, on the problematic of the body's materiality in its relation to the performativity of gender.

do? They put the imaginary Daniel in a new position, the position of someone who in the future will either keep his promise or fail to keep it. All promises do that. Daniel keeps his promises. Gwendolen, the other protagonist of *Daniel Deronda*, makes a promise to Lydia Glasher, Grandcourt's old mistress, that she fails to keep. She promises not to marry Grandcourt: "I will not interfere with your wishes" (Eliot 1986: 189). All these are clear fictive examples, I claim, of performativity sub one.

In the other passage, Gwendolen performs an aria by Bellini before the sharp critic and true musician Klesmer. This is an example of performativity sub two. Klesmer then passes a rigorous and, for Gwendolen, dismaying judgment:

> Yes, it is true; you have not been well taught .... Still, you are not quite without gifts. You sing in tune, and you have a pretty fair organ. But you produce your notes badly; and that music which you sing is beneath you. It is a form of melody which expresses a puerile state of culture – a dangling, canting, see-saw kind of stuff – the passion and thought of people without any breadth of horizon (Eliot 1986: 79).

Gwendolen's singing is an example of performativity sub two. It does not fit Austin's characterizations of a performative speech act, which will generally be an utterance in the first-person present tense like "I promise", or "I bet", or "I warn". Gwendolen's singing is a performance, not a performative. It may reveal her character, her weakness as a singer, as well as the shallowness of Bellini, in Klesmer's view, but it does not fit any of Austin's examples of ways to do things with words.

An earlier brief discussion of *Daniel Deronda* in the Oslo paper referred to above had a simple goal: to give clear examples of performativity sub one and performativity sub two in order to exemplify as forcefully as I could the difference

between them. I made the mistake, however, of incautiously observing that

> if I had more time I would analyze in detail two moments in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* that demonstrate both the fundamental usefulness of performativity theory for understanding what happens in literary works and, at the same time, the essential function of literary study as a way of understanding what is at stake in performativity studies.

Lars Sætre has called my bluff by asking me to do just that. It was incautious of me because doing what I promised could be done would require a lengthy reading of the whole novel, an impossibility in a short paper. Every phrase and sentence in this long novel counts, every scrap of imagined conversation. I can, however, sketch out what such a reading might be like. Those interested may wish to read Cynthia Chase's admirable essay, "The Decomposition of the Elephants" (1986), to see how much can be done with little in readings of *Daniel Deronda*.

I argued in the Oslo paper that Daniel Deronda's promise to Mordecai to carry on his work after his death exemplifies not so much an Austinian performative as a Derridean one. What is the difference? Austinian performatives depend on a pre-existing self and on pre-existing rules and conventions. The performative speech act must be uttered by the right person in the right circumstances. Derridean performatives, on the contrary, create the self that utters them, as well as the context that makes them felicitous. They are, moreover, a response to a call made by something or someone "wholly other". I am no longer sure I was right in what I said in the Oslo paper. Deronda's two promises to Mordecai fit Austin's description of a felicitous performative in that both take the form of a first-person pronoun plus a present tense active verb, or at least an implicit one: "[I promise] I will be faith-

ful", and "[I promise] that everything I can in conscience do to make your life effective I will do".

Daniel's promises, moreover, are based on a pre-existing "I" or "ego". He is presented throughout the novel as an earnest, self-conscious man of thoughtful rectitude who is determined to do his duty when he can see it clearly. The whole fabric of English morality is firmly in place as a context for his promise-making. He is free to commit himself to a vocation. His problem is that no overwhelming, life-determining duty has as yet presented itself. He is in the whole early part of the novel without a vocation. Now an irresistible duty does present itself. Mordecai's appeal to him is based on a notion, borrowed from the Kabbalah, of metempsychosis. They are one soul in two persons. After Mordecai's death his soul will pass into Daniel and Daniel will continue his work of furthering the Jewish cause by helping to establish a new Jewish nation. Mordecai is convinced, correctly as it turns out, that Daniel must really be Jewish. Daniel's promises are made, though he does not yet know it, on the solid basis of his actual Jewish identity. It is not the case, as in Derridean performatives, that he becomes a new self when he utters a performative speech act in response to an appeal made to him by someone or something "wholly other", or that he is a Butlerian blank slate that becomes a social self through the iteration of some form of role-playing.

The performativity theories of both Derrida and Butler, different as they are, would have seemed appalling to George Eliot. She was a firm believer in fixed innate selfhood, or she saw those who lacked such a thing as being in a parlous state. The drama of the Daniel Deronda part of the novel is that Daniel discovers who he already is, that is, that he is a Jew. Once he discovers that he has no choice but to be faithful to his discovery, and he joyfully does that. He keeps his promises to Mordecai. To many modern readers, me included,

this seems almost too easy. It is a strange wish-fulfillment version of the Freudian "family romance" in which the child's fantasies that his parents are not really his parents, that he is a prince in disguise, do actually come true. How nice it would be, a modern reader thinks (that is, someone who feels himself or herself, in Montaigne's phrase, as *ondoyant et divers*, wavering and diverse), if some unquestionable power would tell me who I already inalterably am. In George Eliot's defense, it must be said that the somewhat absurd fable of the Daniel Deronda part of the novel was a response to a full sense of what would be so disastrous about the alternative Derridean or Butlerian theories of the self. Her novels belong in the middle of a spectrum, in English literature at least, that goes from the assumption that selfhood is innate and fixed to the assumption that it is variable and socially constructed. This is not exactly a historical sequence, since all English novelists, even those of the same historical period, have different assumptions about selfhood. Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* challenges any assumption that, for example, something like Virginia Woolf's ideas about selfhood in *The Waves* were unique to the modernist period.

The other half of *Daniel Deronda*, the catastrophic story of Gwendolen Harleth, can be read as a proleptic presentation and critique of Butler's theory of performativity, as it is somewhat oversimplified in such derivative accounts as the previously mentioned entry in *Wikipedia*. The portrait of Gwendolen is one of the greatest and most complex character presentations in Victorian fiction, comparable, let's say, to Tolstoy's Anna Karenina in subtlety. It is not all that easy to say something worthy of Gwendolen's complexity in a few paragraphs. A shorthand approach can be made by way of a recognition that she is only one of many characters in *Daniel Deronda* who are presented by way of their performances or their performativity sub two. An essential theme of *Daniel*

Deronda is singing and acting in public, literal performance, and what doing that means for selfhood. The novel offers itself to modern-day performance studies as a wonderful reservoir of Victorian theories of performativity sub two. Klesmer, modeled on Lizst, whose work George Eliot much admired, is a great composer and pianist. Deronda's Jewish mother, he finally discovers, was a famous singer and actress, whose stage name was "Alcharisi". Mirah, the good Jewish girl, foil to Gwendolen, whom Deronda saves from drowning herself in despair and ultimately marries, has been forced by her father to become a singer and actress. Gwendolen is more than once measured by her abilities as a singer and actress.

Eliot's theory of performativity sub two is complex and perhaps even contradictory. On the one hand, Klesmer's compositions and performances are praised because they come directly from his powerful and commanding personality. In them he expresses a pre-existing self:

> Herr Klesmer played a composition of his own, a fantasia called *Freudvoll, Leidvoll, Gedankenvoll* [Joyful, Sorrowful, Thoughtful] – an extensive commentary on some melodic ideas not too grossly evident; and he certainly fetched as much variety and depth of passion out of the piano as that moderately responsive instrument lends itself to, having an imperious magic in his fingers that seemed to send a nerve-thrill through ivory key and wooden hammer, and compel the strings to make a quivering lingering speech for him (Eliot 1986: 79-80).

On the other hand, Klesmer's performances are the result of the long and arduous acquisition of a skill that is like a craft. That craft you must study and be taught by masters, as a patient apprentice. You do not just sit down at the piano, and then express yourself. You must first study long and hard, as well as submit yourself to the limitations of your instrument, in this case the "moderately responsive" piano. Since Klesmer has done both of these things, he can compel the strings to make a quivering lingering speech for him, as though he himself were speaking through the sounds he makes.

Deronda's mother is probably modeled on such famous actresses or singers as the Jewess Rachel (mentioned in the novel) and the Italian Grisi (also mentioned). She was a "born singer and actress" (Eliot 1986: 696), which suggests that these talents are innate, part of her selfhood as a gifted person. She was, however, also arduously trained. She became a famous actress and singer, until she began to lose her voice and sing out of tune. She then married a Russian nobleman: "I made believe that I preferred being the wife of a Russian noble to being the greatest lyric actress of Europe; I made believe – I acted that part" (Eliot 1986: 703). The novel leaves no doubt about Alcharisi's great gifts and great success. These did not, however, make her a good or happy person. She deliberately betrayed her Jewish heritage and her father's piety to become a singer/actress, and she gave her son, Daniel, away to be brought up as an Englishman by one of the many men who loved her, Sir Hugo Mallinger. She thereby has cruelly prevented him for many years from learning that he is a Jew, that is, from learning who he really is.

Eliot is discreet about whether Alcharisi became the mistress of Sir Hugo or of any of her other suitors. Perhaps yes; perhaps no. Her repudiation of her Jewish heritage can be read in a way ironically like *Wikipedia*'s somewhat reductive version of Butler's early position, since Eliot disapproved of what Butler is said to enjoin. Moreover, in a further irony, in her current work Butler embraces her own Jewish heritage, for example in the section on Lévinas in a quite recent book, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005: 84-101). She is more like Daniel Deronda than like his mother. Alcharisi deliberately repudiates the self her father and her Jewish community wanted her to be, that is, a good, subordinate, obedient

Jewish daughter and wife. She chooses rather the freedom of becoming a great singer and actress. Alcharisi embodies the possible disconnect between acting and singing, on the one hand, and personal integrity such as might lead one to make promises and keep them, on the other. Her marriage to Prince Halm-Eberstein was a piece of insubstantial playacting not based on a solid selfhood. In a wonderful passage in the scene in which the Princess tells her son Daniel the story of her life and justifies her abandonment of him to Sir Hugo, Eliot describes her highly theatrical performance, a mixture of defiant self-defense and confession, by way of an oxymoron, as "sincere acting":

> The varied transitions of tone with which this speech was delivered were as perfect as the most accomplished actress could have made them. The speech was in fact a piece of what may be called sincere acting: this woman's nature was one in which all feeling – and all the more when it was tragic as well as real – immediately became matter of conscious representation: experience immediately passed into drama, and she acted her own emotions. In a minor degree this is nothing uncommon, but in the Princess the acting had a rare perfection of physiognomy, voice, and gesture. It would not be true to say that she felt less because of this double consciousness: she felt – that is, her mind went through – all the more, but with a difference: each nucleus of pain or pleasure had a deep atmosphere of the excitement of spiritual intoxication which at once exalts and deadens (Eliot 1986: 691-2).

The Princess' performance for Daniel is presented as a battle between her real self and the false self she has trained herself to become. "It was as if", says Eliot, "her mind were breaking into several, one jarring the other into impulsive action" (Eliot 1986: 700). She has decided to tell Daniel of his Jewishness in a victory of her real Jewish self, what Eliot calls "the poor, solitary, forsaken remains of self, that can resist nothing" (Eliot 1986: 699), and of her father's desires for her, over

her false, artificial acting self. Eliot is here again faithful to her presupposition that each of us has an innate, ultimately inalienable, self.

Mirah is another cup of tea. Her bad father has forcefully separated her from her mother and from her mother's Jewish piety. Her father has forced her to become an actress and singer. She tells the assembled Meyrick family, which has given her sanctuary, that she has always hated acting. Her father's mistress and her teacher, "an Italian lady, a singer" (Eliot 1986: 252), predicts her failure: "She will never be an artist; she has no notion of being anybody but herself" (Eliot 1986: 253). This conforms to the anti-theatrical tradition that says that being a good actor or actress is a priori incompatible with the integrity of a fixed selfhood that can commit itself in loving attachment to another person. Henry James' *The Tragic Muse* (1889/1890) is an admirably subtle exploration of this theme. Mirah confirms her happy limitation (from George Eliot's perspective) when she says, "I knew that my acting was not good except when it was not really acting, but the part was one that I could be myself in, and some feeling within me carried me along" (Eliot 1986: 258). This propensity, somewhat paradoxically, makes her a gifted singer of songs that she can use as a means of self-expression. When she sings for Herr Klesmer, to get his judgment on her chances of making a living in London as a singer, he shakes her hand afterward and says, "You are a musician" (Eliot 1986: 541), though he says she should perform only in private drawing-rooms, since her voice is not strong enough for the concert hall. Singing, for Eliot, seems to differ from acting in that good singing is not incompatible with having a solid, fixed self.

Gwendolen's performativity

That leaves Gwendolen, the most complex case in the novel of the relation between performativity and selfhood. Her performances should be judged in the context of the presentations of Klesmer, Alcharisi, and Mirah. Gwendolen is a good demonstration of Judith Butler's claim that society coerces people, particularly women, to be something artificial and limited. Social selfhood, for Butler, is artificial in the sense that it is not innate. It is limited in the sense that a limitless potential is narrowed to fit a preconceived mold. Society imposes on women the ideological presuppositions of gender difference, as if they were natural and innate. Society shapes us. It is, Butler argues, our responsibility to try to shape society so that the process by which we acquire subjecthood will become as beneficial as possible. Deronda's Zionism is an example of a noble attempt to shape society for the good of a whole group: the Jewish people.

Gwendolen has been coerced, interpellated, to be what she is. Gwendolen's ideas and her feeble ability to play and sing are those of the ordinary genteel middle class young marriageable woman of the Victorian period. She thinks she is a gifted singer, but Klesmer passes remorseless judgment. She has a "pretty fair organ", as he tells her, but she has "not been well taught", and her choice of Bellini is a disaster, since his music "expresses a puerile state of culture", "no cries of deep, mysterious passion – no conflict – no sense of the universal" (Eliot 1986: 79), such as Mirah's singing exemplifies.

Gwendolen's singing, as opposed to Mirah's, expresses her lack of authentic selfhood rather than her possession of it. When, faced with the, to her, horrible prospect of becoming a governess, she arranges an interview with Klesmer to get him to assure her that she can have a great career as an actress singer. She says to him,

> I know that my method of singing is very defective; but I have been ill taught. I could be better taught; I could study. And you will understand my wish; – to sing and act too, like Grisi, is a much higher position. Naturally, I should wish to take as high a rank as I can (Eliot 1986: 296).

Klesmer tells her, as gently but as firmly as he can, and at length, that she has no hope of becoming a second Grisi. She is starting far too late, and even with years of arduous training she "will hardly achieve more than mediocrity" (Eliot 1986: 303).

Does this mean that Gwendolen has no fixed self? Not quite. Her presentation is a wonderfully perceptive portrait of what Freud was to call a hysteric, though without Freud's etiology of hysterical symptoms. She is subject to what today we would call "panic attacks". Gwendolen's self is a strange combination of "an inborn energy of egoistic desire" (Eliot 1986: 71), a foolish desire for mastery over others, such as she quite mistakenly thinks she will exercise over her cruel husband Grandcourt, and a deep underlying hysterical fear of open spaces, of reality, and of death. After the panic attack I describe below, Eliot comments that

> She was ashamed and frightened, as at what might happen again, in remembering her tremor on suddenly feeling herself alone, when, for example, she was walking without companionship and there came some rapid change in the light. Solitude in any wide scene impressed her with an undefined feeling of immeasurable existence aloof from her, in the midst of which she was helplessly incapable of asserting herself (Eliot 1986: 94-5).

In the remarkable event involving performativity sub two that Eliot is here commenting on, Gwendolen thinks to dazzle her family and the other guests at Offendene by performing the scene in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* in which Hermione is

wakened by music from her statue-like fixity: "Music, awake her, strike!" It is a fine irony that Shakespeare's scene ascribes to music the power to awake someone from a sleep that is like death, for example the trance-like sleep of Gwendolen's everyday alienation from herself. It is a further irony that Klesmer should play the music that awakens this pseudo-Hermione. When Klesmer strikes a thunderous chord on the piano, a wall panel flies open and Gwendolen is faced with a hitherto hidden picture. The picture shows a dead face and a fleeing figure. In the Hermione scene Gwendolen's sudden sight of the dead face and the fleeing figure brings on a hysterical fit of extreme terror. She stops her life-long playacting for a few instants. She becomes for a few moments what she really is. She is a person dominated by a hidden fear, fear not of anything in particular, but of human existence itself, of its open ungovernable spaces that are forever beyond her control. For a moment she is not performing at all. She is herself, even though that takes the form of looking like a statute embodying Fear:

> Everyone was startled, but all eyes in the act of turning towards the opened panel were recalled by a piercing cry from Gwendolen, who stood without change of attitude, but with a change of expression that was terrifying in its terror. She looked like a statue in which a soul of Fear had entered: her pallid lips were parted; her eyes, usually narrowed under their long lashes, were dilated and fixed. ... Gwendolen fell on her knees and put her hands before her face. She was still trembling, but mute ... (Eliot 1986: 91-2).

Daniel's anomalous speech acts

The powerful episode of Gwendolen's playing Hermione is proleptic of a scene much later in the novel dramatizing her guilty inability to help the drowning Grandcourt when he

falls overboard from their yacht in the Mediterranean. "I saw my wish outside me", she tells Daniel when she confesses to him her complicity in Grandcourt's death (Eliot 1986: 761). Her confession comes late in the novel. It involves two more somewhat anomalous speech acts uttered by Daniel. These are authentic cases of performativity sub one, but strange ones. A confession is a performative use of language in the sense that the one who confesses not only speaks the truth, constatively, but also does so in a way that may have consequences. A confession may be a way of doing something with words. It may, for example, bring about a trial and conviction if what is confessed is a criminal act. Since Daniel does not make Gwendolen's confession public, just as a priest keeps the secrets of the confession box, her confession leads only to his response. That response is an odd kind of promise quite unlike the ones Daniel makes to Mordecai. The scene of Gwendolen's confession is quite painful, even embarrassing, to read, not only because it marks the breakdown of her self-possession, but also because it makes clear that she sees in Daniel not only a moral savior, but also a possible husband. For the first time she is capable of a genuine love for someone other than herself. Daniel's destiny, however, is to marry Mirah, even though some readers may expect or hope that the two halves of the novel will come together in a triumphant union of Gwendolen and Daniel. Eliot raises that hope only to dash it in a way that strikes me as a somewhat cruel punishment of Gwendolen, however much she may deserve it.

Daniel listens with immense sympathy and sorrow to Gwendolen's confession, and consoles her as best he can by saying that Grandcourt would almost certainly have drowned even if she had made extravagant efforts to save him. At one point Daniel's response to her detailed confession and pitiable hope that he will not forsake her is just to hold her hand. This is an unspoken promise that is defined,

in a striking formulation, as being like putting your name to a blank sheet of paper, signing a blank check, as we might say today:

> He took one of her hands and clasped it as if they were going to walk together like two children: it was the only way in which he could answer, "I will not forsake you". And all the while he felt as if he were putting his name to a blank paper which might be filled up terribly (Eliot 1986: 755).

Here a gesture, the handholding, substitutes for a literal speech act, in a way that Austin's theories allow. Daniel fears, however, that the blank sheet of paper with his signature on it, another performative, will be filled up by Gwendolen's expectation that he will marry her. Later in the scene, after she has described her "wickedness" in allowing Grandcourt to drown, she beseeches him once more, "You will not forsake me?" and he answers, "It could never be my impulse to forsake you", but "with the painful consciousness that to her ear his words might carry a promise which one day would seem unfulfilled: he was making an indefinite promise to an indefinite hope" (Eliot 1986: 765).

Is this what Austin calls a "felicitous" promise or not? Yes and no. Daniel certainly means it when he says it will never be his impulse to forsake Gwendolen, but she takes his words in a different way from his intention, which is simply to be kind to Gwendolen in her extreme distress. Daniel has a foreboding that he may be misunderstood. He has spoken his promise

> with that voice which, like his eyes, had the unintentional effect of making his ready sympathy seem more personal and special than it really was. And in that moment he was not himself quite free from a foreboding of some such self-committing effect (Eliot 1986: 765).

Daniel has not meant to commit himself, but his words, his voice, and his eyes commit themselves for him. This is a splendid example of the way a speech act may have unintended consequences. It may make something happen all right. It may be a way of doing something with words. It may, however, do something quite different from what the speaker means to do.

This doctrine of the unintended results of a speech act anticipates Paul de Man's notion of speech acts in "Promises (*Social Contract*)", in *Allegories of Reading* (1979), and elsewhere in his late work.[3] I remember hearing de Man encapsulate this in a seminar by saying, "You aim at a bear, and an innocent bird falls out of the sky". The words you utter enter the interpersonal, social, and political world, where they have such consequences as they do have when they are taken in a certain way. Sometimes your well-meant words may have violent or cruel effects, as when Daniel unintentionally misleads Gwendolen into thinking he might love her. His words operate on their own, independent of his intention or will, as he half suspects. Any performative I utter is like signing my name to a blank check or on a blank sheet of paper, leaving someone else to insert the amount I owe or the obligation I have incurred.

Can Daniel be held responsible for a breach of promise? That is a difficult question. He has, after all, uttered those words and must take responsibility for having uttered them. He has held Gwendolen's hand and promised never to forsake her. Dickens in *Pickwick Papers* dramatizes this question in a comic but nevertheless profound way. Pickwick's innocent note to his landlady, Mrs Bardell, ordering supper, "Dear Mrs B.–Chops and tomata sauce. Yours, PICKWICK" (Dickens 1972: 562), seems to her and to her lawyers, ab-

3 For a full discussion of Paul de Man's theory of speech acts, see chapter 3 of my *Speech Acts in Literature* (Miller 2001).

surdly enough, a proposal of marriage. This leads to a suit for breach of promise, the trial of Bardell against Pickwick that lands Pickwick in prison. Any form of words may have an unforeseen and unintended performative effect, such as getting you in prison. It might be better to keep silent.

Derrida's theory of performatives is more radical and disturbing. He affirms that even silence does not protect you from radical breaches of promises you have never explicitly made. Derrida holds in *The Gift of Death* (1999; 2008) that I have made an implicit promise to care for every person and animal in the world, every "other" whatsoever, even if I have never uttered a word that can be taken as an overt promise to do that. This limitless obligation leads to the aporia of responsibility. I have no hope of fulfilling all my responsibilities to all those others, each and every one of them. I take care of my one cat, but I ought to be feeding and housing all the cats in the world, all those cats that are dying of starvation and exposure every day.

A thoughtful reading of the episode of Gwendolen's confession in *Daniel Deronda* is a good example of the way literature is an exemplary place to investigate the complexities of performativity sub one in its difference from performativity sub two. All the other characters in the novel offer other examples, in a spectrum of possibilities. This exemplarity can be investigated, of course, only if by a willing suspension of disbelief the reader or critic thinks, for the moment, of these fictive, language-created personages as if they were real people.

I claim to have exemplified the distinction between the two kinds of performativity. I claim also to have demonstrated that both speech act theory and performance studies, fundamentally different as they are, allow the critic to ask questions of literary works that may lead to productive readings of them. The critic, however, must guard against presuppositions, such

as my predilection for Derrida even over Austin, whom I also greatly admire. The critic must be prepared to be surprised by the answers her or his questions elicit.

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Exploring Textual Action

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