

“Like a Marriage with a Monkey”

An Argument for the Use of Speech-Act Theory in the Analysis of Humor

Austin, Searle, and the Performative

In *Sense and Sensibilia*, J. L. Austin complains about the tendency in philosophy for a term to become so broadly used that it ceases to be useful at all, a process whereby “a word, which already has a very specific meaning, [is] gradually stretched, without caution or definition or any limit, until it becomes, first perhaps obscurely metaphorical, but ultimately meaningless” (15). Austin coined the term “performative” to refer to those utterances that, unlike statements, do not “‘describe’ or ‘report’ or constate anything at all”; rather, “the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action,” as in his example, “I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow” (*How to* 5). But in the fifty years since Austin delivered his William James Lectures at Harvard, published posthumously as *How to Do Things with Words*, literary and cultural theorists have joined philosophers of language in taking an interest in performatives and have shown “a heightened willingness to credit a performative dimension in all ritual, ceremonial, scripted behaviors” (Parker and Sedgwick 2).¹ In particular, Jacques Derrida’s 1971 essay “Signature Event Context”² offered a critique of Austin that has led many theorists to reclaim for consideration the theatrical dimension of the term “perform,” which Austin

explicitly—Derrida would say wrongly—excluded, creating a dialogue between performativity theory and performance studies.³ But if the word “performative” is to retain a useful specificity, it cannot be used as an adjective synonymous with “theatrical” nor as a noun synonymous with “performance.” One can analyze the act of teaching, for example, as performance or as performative, but these are overlapping, not identical, analyses. Elsewhere, the current fashion of coining awkward plurals such as “literatures” and “masculinities” (and “plurals”) has given us the unfortunate and unnecessary term “performativities,” which may please its users but brings nothing to the discussion (Parker and Sedgwick 1). Echoing Austin, Stanley Fish complains that “speech-act theory has been sacrificed to the desire of the literary critic”: “The career of this desire always unfolds in two stages: (1) the system or theory is emptied of its content so that the distinctions it is able to make are lost or blurred, and (2) what remains, a terminology and an empty framework, is made into a metaphor” (*Is There a Text in This Class?* 221). Consider, for example, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s conception of the word “performative” as “lodged in a metaphors of space” and serving as a “conceptual [tool] for moving back and forth between speech act theory and dramaturgical performance” (68). For Sedgwick, in other words, “performative” is indeed a metaphor and is explicitly used to blur distinctions. Though work in the area of performativity has certainly broadened and flourished in interesting ways since Austin, in large part by challenging his (and more so John Searle’s) alleged rigidity, it is important not to use the terminology so freely that in describing everything it explains nothing.

Perhaps the best way to stay clear about terminology and usage is to begin at the beginning: “What I shall have to say,” Austin declares, “is neither difficult nor contentious; the only merit I should like to claim for it is that of being true, at least in parts. The phenomenon to be discussed is very widespread and obvious” (*How to* 1). Namely:

Utterances can be found . . . such that

A. they do not “describe” or “report” or constatae anything at all, are not “true or false”; and

B. the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not *normally* be described as, or as “just,” saying something.

This is far from being as paradoxical as it may sound or as I have meanly been trying to make it sound: indeed, the examples now to be given will be disappointing. (5)

Austin gives as examples a marriage vow, the christening of a ship, the bequeathing of a will, and a bet about tomorrow’s weather.

In these examples, it seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it. . . . What are we to call an utterance of this type? I propose to call it a *performative sentence* or a performative utterance, or, for short, “a performative.” . . . The name . . . indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action—it is not normally thought of as just saying something. (6–7)

The performative—“I now pronounce you husband and wife”—stands in contrast to the constative, the sentence that merely states or reports—“They are married.” “It was for too long the assumption of philosophers that the business of a ‘statement’ can only be to ‘describe’ some state of affairs, or to ‘state some fact,’ which it must do either truly or falsely” (Austin, *How to 1*). But if speech is a form of action, this “descriptive fallacy” falls by the wayside, and the performative is distinguished from the constative: the former, as an action, is assessed as either successful or unsuccessful (“happy” or “unhappy”), the latter as true or false. Having isolated, named, and defined his subject, Austin posits what he—and subsequent theorists of performativity—calls “Rule A.1”: for an utterance to be, and act as, a performative, “there must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, the procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances” (*How to 14*).

Austin also provides the terminology to distinguish “locution” (the utterance itself, as a string of words) from “illocution” or “illocutionary force” (the intentional and conventional force of the utterance, as described in Rule A.1) and “perlocution” (the consequences of the speech act: how the words affect the hearer and the context). Austin is not particularly interested in locution, in what the words say, but rather in what the words do—that is, in illocution and perlocution: “What we have to study is *not* the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech situation” (*How to 139*). As we will see in chapters 3 and 4, Jacques Derrida is interested almost exclusively in locution, and recognizing this fact will be critical to understanding the meaning, and evaluating the significance, of Derrida’s reply to Austin.

John Searle defines speech acts as “acts performed in the utterance of a sentence” (*Speech Acts 18*). These acts include “making statements,

giving commands, asking questions, making promises, and so on”; these utterances, then, are “produced with certain kinds of intentions” (16). (I will have much more to say later regarding intentionality.) Searle distinguishes between “utterance acts” and “illocutionary acts” (17), the former corresponding to Austin’s locutions,⁴ and like Austin, Searle is primarily interested in the latter, in the agentic, real-world use of language to enact some illocutionary intent and effect some perlocutionary result. Austin admits that the distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts is “slippery,” but it can be clarified somewhat through the distinction between “in” and “by” (*How to* 131). *In* saying “Leave the room,” I issue a command, an illocutionary act; *by* saying “Leave the room,” I make the person leave, a perlocutionary act. Searle defines “perlocution” as “the consequences or effects [illocutionary] acts have on the actions, thoughts, or beliefs, etc. of hearers” (*Speech Acts* 25). Austin defines “perlocution” as the production of “certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, *or of the speaker, or of other persons*” (*How to* 101, emphasis added). Note that here, as elsewhere, Austin’s provisional discussion of the performative provides a theory less refined, but more heuristic, than Searle’s revision. Whereas Searle locates perlocutionary effects in the intended hearers, Austin’s definition invites a consideration of, say, self-talk and diaries as perlocutionary and perhaps performative, and a consideration of who the curious “other persons” in Austin’s definition may be and what role they play in “the total speech situation”: as witnesses, unintended or marginalized readers and listeners, eavesdroppers, and so on.

For the present study, the term “performative” is more useful than “speech act” to describe the utterances under investigation, “performative” being at once more narrow and more capacious: more narrow in that, as both Austin and Searle indicate, not all speech acts qualify as performatives, and more capacious in that the study of performatives has come to include not only verbal acts but nonverbal acts (clothing, body language) and partially verbal acts (the performativity of a courtroom scene, wherein the authority of judicial speech acts is in part derived from and invested in clothing, spatial arrangements, etc.). When the priest says, in performing the wedding ceremony, “By the power vested in me,” he is not only declaring his authority but drawing attention to one of its indicators: the visible and distinctive vestments that both symbolize and authorize performative power—“Society,” as Carlyle remarked, “is founded upon cloth.”

The heuristic character of *How to Do Things with Words*—“an analysis which is patient, open, aporetic, in constant transformation” (Derrida, *Limited Inc* 14)—is either inspiring or frustrating, depending upon the intensity of one’s need for precise definitions and decisive arguments. For example, Austin acknowledges that “*any*, or almost any, perlocutionary act is liable to be brought off, in sufficiently special circumstances, by the issuing, with or without calculation, of any utterance whatsoever” (*How to* 110). So for example, the single word “Bull,” painted on a sign attached to a fence, may seem at first merely propositional or at most an abbreviated constative. But “Bull” may, given the significance provided by its context, by “the speech-situation as a whole” (138), perform perfectly well as an illocutionary act of warning people against jumping the fence and encountering hostile cattle. By the end of *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin has abandoned the distinction between constatives and performatives and thus “the notion of the purity of performatives” (150). The distinction collapses because “in general and for all utterances that we have considered (except perhaps for swearing),” Austin finds both a “happiness/unhappiness dimension” and a “truth/falsehood dimension” (148). So regarding constatives, Austin concludes: “Stating, describing, &c. are *just two* names among a very great many others for illocutionary acts; they have no unique position. . . . A belief in the dichotomy of performatives and constatives . . . has to be abandoned in favour of more general *families* of related and overlapping speech acts” (148–49, 150). In a parallel assertion from the rhetoric department, Burke says that his two approaches to language, “scientific” (“*It is*, or *it is not*”) and dramatic (“*Thou shalt*, or *thou shalt not*”), “are by no means mutually exclusive,” that “the overlap is considerable”: even seemingly scientific acts of definition and description “may be treated as attitudinal and hortatory” (*Language* 44).

Searle, on the other hand, protects the purity of the performative:

Every utterance is a *performance* in the sense that every utterance is a speech act, but not every utterance is thereby a *performative*. Within utterances, i.e., speech acts, there is a subclass of utterances that are performed by way of using a word that names the very type of act being performed. These and only these are performative utterances. Thus “I order you to leave the room” is a performative, and it is a performative used to make an order. “Leave the room,” on the other hand, is a sentence used to make an order, but the making of the order with this sentence is not a *performative*, though, of course, it is a performance. (“Response” 95)

So according to Searle’s definition, the sign “Warning: bull” is a warning and a performative, while “Bull” is a warning but not a performative. This distinction is clear, decisive, and logically sound, but in practice unsatisfactory. Though it certainly heeds Austin’s warning against overextending terminology, Austin himself sees the performative as a broader category, calling the performative as narrowly defined by Searle “a peculiar and special use” (*How to* 63). We also have Austin’s repeated insistence that “the total speech act in the total speech situation is the *only actual* phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating” (148). Austin’s “actual” is telling, marking his interest in real-world *parole*, not decontextualized *langue*; Searle’s narrow definition loses its usefulness when we turn from types to tokens, from grammatical forms to the situated, real-world use and effects of language.⁵

Searle, of course, is not beholden to Austin’s interests or opinions: “I hold no brief for the details of Austin’s theory of speech acts,” he asserts (“Reiterating” 204). But given the importance Searle himself grants to intentionality and illocutionary force as the engines of performative felicity, his narrow definition of performative *speech* seems insensitive to the defining *action* of performativity: the rhetorical interplay and cooperation among text, author, and audience, within a particular context and against a background of shared social knowledge and capacities, within which both “Warning: bull” and “Bull” function to keep people out of the pasture. “I order you to leave the room” and “Leave the room” share the same illocutionary force and the same perlocutionary end, and both are clearly orders, as Searle himself states. The only difference is the presence of the explicit “I order you to.” Austin says, “The verbs which seem, on grounds of vocabulary, to be specially performative verbs serve the special purpose of *making explicit* . . . what precise action it is that is being performed by the issuing of the utterance” (*How to* 61). So while “I order you” may emphasize and formalize the illocutionary force of the utterance, that illocutionary force is perfectly clear without the explicit marker. It is not the explicit “I order you”—any more than its implied presence in “Leave the room”—that makes the hearer leave (or, for that matter, defy the order and refuse to leave: either perlocutionary act proves this point), but rather the shared recognition of the utterance as a conventional, intentional act of speech. Furthermore, not only can we have performative felicity without the “I order you,” but “we may get the operative word without the utterance being performative” (*How to* 59). That is, “I order you” need not be performative at all. Let’s say I’m train-

ing security guards and pose this scenario to my trainees: “If I’m someone who’s not authorized to be in this room, what do you do if I barge in here?” A trainee replies, “I order you to leave the room.” This reply has the wording of an order but is not an order: the “order,” in this case, is being cited, not performed, mentioned rather than used.⁶

Making Room for Humor

What continues to fascinate and amaze me about performatives is the fact that we can create so many—and such complex—forms of social reality, from declarations and promises to laws and diplomas, with “mere” words. This is performativity in action, and to reserve the name “performative” for only those utterances that explicitly name the performed act seems to discount the extent to which performativity pervades social reality, an extent Searle himself has addressed.⁷ Further, few of our everyday performative acts take the form of a first-person, present, indicative, active utterance that names the act it performs. This is true even of tightly scripted official speech acts. Searle’s definition would only label as a performative a police officer’s wordy (and unlikely) exclamation, “I order you to stop, or I declare that I will shoot you!”; but we need only put ourselves in the shoes of the officer, a witness, or the person running to experience the equivalent performative force in such alternatives as “Stop, or I’ll shoot!,” “Stop, police!,” or even just “Police!” I therefore want to deviate from Searle’s definition by introducing a distinction between explicit performatives (“I order you to stop, or I declare that I will shoot you!”) and implicit performatives (“Police!”). Like all distinctions, this one blurs at the edges: “Stop or I’ll shoot!” seems to me more explicit than implicit, though it does not meet Searle’s criteria for recognition as a performative at all. I feel more confident in labeling “Police!” an implicit performative, as it makes no reference at all to its illocutionary force: its performative felicity requires more social, contextual background knowledge on the part of the hearer than does “I order you to stop, or I declare that I will shoot you!”—which requires only that the hearer understand the words and have a desire to remain alive and unperforated. Even so, the speech act in each case is clearly an order, and the choices are clearly to stop or be stopped.⁸

But loosening the definition of the performative and introducing the implicit performative returns us to Austin’s warning: where do we stop?

Just how willing should we be “to credit a performative dimension in all ritual, ceremonial, scripted behaviors” (Parker and Sedgwick 2)? Is every utterance performative? The demise of the constative/performative distinction does not lead Austin to conclude that *all* utterances are therefore performatives, though perhaps the majority are. Such a conclusion would make Austin’s neologism superfluous, a synonym for something as general as “speech act” or even “utterance.” Austin maintains that exclamations, like “Damn” and “Ouch,” are not performatives or even illocutionary acts (*How to* 133). Nick Fotion, however, does read Austin as claiming that, “in the end, all uses of language are performatives” (17). This may or may not be a misreading of Austin, depending on what Fotion means by “uses of language”: is he referring only to speech acts and excluding spontaneous exclamatory outbursts as not being “uses”? Habermas speaks of “the performative character of all speech acts” (26), which may replicate Austin’s position or may take it a step further, depending again on Habermas’s definition of “speech act” and whether an utterance can have a “performative character” even if it is not a formal performative, as Sedgwick suggests with her phrase “performative dimension” and her concept of the “periperformative” (68). In the end, it is not entirely clear where and how much these theorists disagree with one another and how much the apparent disagreements come down, appropriately and perhaps ironically, to differences in doing things with words.

Searle, however, clearly separates himself from Austin, Habermas, Sedgwick, and Fotion by preserving the performative, not only by claiming that there are many illocutionary acts that are not performative but also by arguing that many illocutions are not even perlocutionary. He states, “Saying something and meaning it is a matter of intending to perform an illocutionary, not necessarily a perlocutionary act” (*Speech Acts* 44). But I believe that this, as Austin says of the distinction between locution and illocution, is a distinction more in theory than in practice and is a distinction more likely to be drawn by a philosopher of language than by a rhetorician. From the perspective of rhetoric, there is, in every instance of an illocutionary act, the motive or desire on the part of the speaker to achieve a certain perlocutionary effect, even if that desire is inarticulate or, in the moment of utterance, not in the foreground of one’s consciousness. On the uptake side of the speech situation, assuming the speaker is heard and understood, there will always be among the hearers some perlocutionary effect and affect beyond mere hearing and

understanding. Searle states: “Even when there generally is a correlated perlocutionary effect, I may say something and mean it without in fact intending to produce that effect. Thus, for example, I may make a statement without caring whether my audience believes it or not but simply because I feel it my duty to make it” (*Speech Acts* 44). I believe, however, that Searle’s example proves my point about theory versus practice. Even indifference is an attitude toward one’s audience, and toward perlocutionary effects, and indifference to the audience’s belief or disbelief does not mean that the audience won’t either believe or disbelieve the speaker. Further, the successful fulfilling of one’s duty requires auditors without whose shared understanding there is no concept of “duty” and without whose witness there is no context within which to perform duty’s fulfillment. Illocutionary acts always embrace perlocutionary ends: we do not speak pointlessly into the void, but rather address, with a certain attitude and intentionality, someone we hope is listening.

As an example of an illocutionary act without perlocutionary effect, Searle uses the act of greeting: “There is no associated perlocutionary effect of greeting. When I say ‘Hello’ and mean it, I do not necessarily intend to produce or elicit any state or action in my hearer other than the knowledge that he is being greeted. . . . The meaning of the sentence ‘Get out’ ties it to a particular intended perlocutionary effect, namely getting the hearer to leave. The meanings of ‘Hello’ and ‘I promise’ do not” (*Speech Acts* 46). But I don’t think this claim is correct: “Hello” does have a perlocutionary goal, however varied, subtle, and unexpressed, beyond mere recognition of the greeting. Searle insists that “any account of meaning must show that when I say ‘I promise’ or ‘Hello’ and mean it, I mean it in exactly the same sense of ‘mean’ as when I say ‘Get out’ and mean it” (44). He answers this requirement by saying that the speaker’s intention in all three utterances is not perlocutionary, but illocutionary: “Saying something and meaning it is a matter of intending to perform an illocutionary, not necessarily a perlocutionary, act” (44). But Searle’s requirement is also answered if we can show that there is a perlocutionary intention in the uttering of “Hello” just as there clearly is in the uttering of “Get out.” I believe we can show this and from there extend the analysis to argue for a perlocutionary as well as an implicit performative aspect to many illocutionary acts. Compare the “Hello” of two strangers who pass each other in the park, the “Hello” of a police officer to a motorist pulled over for reckless driving, and the “Hello” of a servant to a cruel

and petty master. Searle’s claim that “when I say ‘Hello’ and mean it, I do not necessarily intend to produce or elicit any state or action in my hearer other than the knowledge that he is being greeted” raises the question: why do I want the person to know she or he is being greeted? I must have some perlocutionary motive, as is very clear in the “Hellos” of both the police officer and the servant. In the context of the total speech situation, these speakers’ intentions are not just illocutionary but perlocutionary, and the utterances are meant to do more than merely be recognized as greetings. Both are instances of obligatory or institutional politeness, but they are uttered from opposite positions in a dynamic of power (the armed authority versus the servant); both may be means of testing the waters—what sort of a “Hello,” or other response, comes in reply?—and thus are acts of securing some sort of footing within a potentially volatile interaction. Even in the seemingly innocuous first example of strangers in a park, perlocutionary motives may include the desire to be seen as friendly, or nonthreatening, or flirtatious. In Paul Klee’s etching *Two Men Meet, Each Supposing the Other to Be of Higher Rank*, an exchange of obsequious bowing leaves the two figures absurdly contorted. Though a grotesque exaggeration of class manners, Klee’s piece suggests the perlocutionary intent and the self-, other-, and world-altering action—the world-to-word performativity—of even the simplest utterances.

In sum, not all “Hellos” are alike.

Searle believes that the philosophy of language should strive for a near-scientific degree of objectivity, and one of his objections to continental philosophy is that it seems more like literary theory than science.⁹ This, for Searle, is a most unfortunate alliance, and I will discuss his dispute with continental philosophy, particularly with Jacques Derrida, in chapter 4. The point here is that as sound as Searle’s insights are into critical theory’s more egregious fallacies, his vision of correcting Austinian ambiguity through a more “scientific” philosophy of language has its own blind spots or “deflections,” as does any terministic screen (Burke, *Language* 45). For example, Searle argues that “expressives”—utterances that “express our feelings and attitudes” (*Expression and Meaning* viii), such as “I thank,” “I congratulate,” and “I apologize”—carry no “direction of fit,” no transformative symbolic action, between the words and the world: “In performing an expressive, the speaker is neither trying to get the world to match the words nor the words to match the world, rather the truth of the expressed proposition is presupposed. Thus, for

example, when I apologize for having stepped on your toe, it is not my purpose either to claim that your toe was stepped on nor to get it stepped on” (15). Here I think Searle is taking the “word” in “world-to-word direction of fit” too literally, as he does in the following interview:

MOORE: *Why do we bother to express ourselves if not to affect something in the world? Perhaps simply expressing how we feel is an invitation to someone to respond in some way . . . ?*

SEARLE: It can't be. (Moore 3)

Searle does not explain his emphatic answer, but I take it to mean that since the language of an expressive locution does not literally and explicitly seek to make the world conform to the uttered word (as he points out in the toe-stepping apology example), it cannot perform otherwise, regardless of a speaker's illocutionary intent that it be more than just an apology.

But elsewhere in Searle's work—and even in these same works—is support for the idea of implicit performatives. When Searle writes about direction of fit in *Intentionality*, he replaces “word” with “mind”: “world-to-mind” and “mind-to-world” underscore the importance of a speaker's intention and deemphasize literal locutionary meaning. The second chapter of *Expression and Meaning* analyzes indirect speech acts—“Would you kindly get off my foot?” (37)—and there is no reason such indirection cannot exist in expressives. In fact, some of Searle's examples of indirect speech acts take the form of expressives, while clearly containing a world-to-word direction of fit; that is, the satisfaction of the utterance depends upon the world coming to conform to the words: “I would/should be most grateful if you would/could help us out”; “I wish you wouldn't do that” (37). To the interviewer's follow-up question, “So what would be the point of a null illocutionary act?” Searle replies, “The point of the expressive is to express your feelings and attitudes about some state of affairs that you presuppose to exist already. . . . And I think there are all kinds of points in having expressives, it just makes society work better, if you can express gratitude or express thanks or express regrets in the case of apologies, or express pleasure at somebody's good fortune” (Moore 4). In other words, expressives have a world-to-word direction of fit. Searle continues: “I think there are all kinds of reasons for expressing our feelings and attitudes. It isn't just to get people to change their behaviour. Maybe when you're seducing a woman you're trying to

get her to change her behaviour, you give all sorts of expressives. But there’s a variety of reasons for performing expressives, and I don’t think there is any simple motivation” (Moore 4). Searle writes elsewhere of the errors of behaviorism,¹⁰ and here it seems he may be hearing the question as if the interviewer were suggesting a simple stimulus-and-response relationship between illocution and perlocution. I don’t think this is what the interviewer is getting at, and when Searle says, “there’s a variety of reasons for performing expressives, and I don’t think there is any simple motivation,” he is making exactly my point. The complexity of motivation makes it not only possible but likely that seemingly benign or banal utterances have some performative push behind them, and not only—or even mainly—when we are trying to be manipulative or seductive.

Having said that, there still seems to be an important difference between the performativity of “Hello” and the direct, explicit performativity of “I order you to leave.” Useful here is Searle’s distinction between direct and indirect speech acts. Here is his sample case:

1. Student X: Let’s go to the movies tonight.
2. Student Y: I have to study for an exam. (*Expression and Meaning* 33)

What is Y doing with words, and how do we know Y means “no”? “I have to study for an exam” is an indirect speech act. By Searle’s terminology, Y is performing a primary, nonliteral illocutionary act—declining X’s suggestion—by means of actually uttering a secondary, literal illocutionary act: stating the need to study. We understand Y as declining the suggestion, not by the meaning of the words (which do not literally mean “no”) but by the context—“mutually shared factual background information of the speaker and hearer” (32)—and by our reasonable assumption that what Paul Grice calls the “Cooperative Principle” is in effect: “Though some maxim is violated at the level of what is said, the hearer is entitled to assume that that maxim [in this case, the maxim of “Relation,” or relevance], or at least the overall [Cooperative Principle], is observed at the level of what is implicated” (qtd. in Pratt 163). Furthermore, we can, as Searle does, give a satisfactory formal account of the “Hello” transaction without considering “Hello”’s implicit performativity at all. On the surface, and in terms of basic verbal functionality, it’s just a greeting. But this account does not exhaust the meaning and significance of the utterance: this is not *all* that happens, just as matters of social standing, ideology, politics, class, gender, and so on, are part of the context within

which we utter speech acts. There is more going on, and investigating that “more,” looking beyond necessary and sufficient conditions and constitutive rules, can illuminate the complexity of real-world performative acts. The answer to the question of what (all) a person is doing, consciously and unconsciously, explicitly and implicitly, directly and indirectly, in and by saying X will be lengthy indeed. Now, we don’t *need* to (perhaps we could not) get to the bottom of—that is, fully explicate—psychology, intentionality, and motive to explain how illocutionary and perlocutionary acts work. In fact, matters of individual psychology will only muddy the water or distract us, *if* our goal is to explicate idealized examples and establish the rules and conditions. But it has been over fifty years since Austin deferred consideration of “parasitic” speech acts and forty since Searle excluded from *Speech Acts* the “marginal, fringe, and partially defective” (55). They are still there, clamoring at the gate, and we might get a richer, if less tidy, understanding of the entire speech situation if we let them in, with all their ambiguities and contradictions and psychological baggage.

I therefore propose defining a performative, explicit or implicit, direct or indirect, as *an act of communication, linguistic or otherwise, having a world-to-word—or world-to-symbol/gesture—direction of fit, toward some perlocutionary effect*. (My “otherwise” includes, for example, the hand gestures of a traffic cop, which I would argue are, by this definition, performatives. But since they are nonverbal, they are neither illocutionary acts nor, more broadly, speech acts.)¹¹ It is important to note how this definition differs from Searle’s and how this difference opens up the study of performatives to a consideration of motives. According to Searle’s taxonomy, “assertives”—describing, stating, and concluding, for example—have only a word-to-world direction of fit: we try to make our words correspond to external reality, and external reality determines whether the words “fit.” So in describing to you the events of my day, my description will be felicitous (to use Austin’s term) if it is true and accurate, infelicitous if I’m exaggerating, concealing, lying, and so on. I grant this, but claim as well that I will almost certainly have some motive for telling you about my day beyond merely wanting to accurately recount a series of events: I want it to matter, to the person to whom I am speaking, that this was *my* day. This indirect aspect of the speech act is not trivial; in fact, in real-world interactions, the satisfaction of the nonliteral, indirect illocutionary act may be more important than the satisfaction of

the literal, direct act in determining whether the utterance was felicitous. Take, for example, the experience of talking about one’s day and feeling as though the listener isn’t really listening. The speaker might say so, to which the listener responds by repeating the speaker’s description verbatim to prove that he was in fact listening. The likelihood that the speaker will find this response unsatisfying points to the fact that the primary illocutionary intent was something other than factual narration and its uptake: the desire to connect on some intimate level has failed, and thus so too has the speech act—even though the hearer’s account is factually accurate, indicating that literal uptake has occurred. As mentioned above, Searle claims that expressives have no direction of fit. But I have disputed that claim, and my definition of performatives acknowledges the world-to-word direction of fit expressives do have: they are “happy” if and only if the world (however localized) changes in the way (however slight) the speaker hopes, the way that has motivated the speaker to utter an expressive in the first place. The change to the “world” may be but a change in the hearer’s attitude and/or in the hearer’s relationship in that moment to the speaker. In narrating the events of my day to someone who cares, my speech act will be “happy” if it results in a moment of empathic connection, of “consubstantiality” (Burke, *Rhetoric* 21). “Directives” (attempts “to get the hearer to do something”) and “commissives” (acts that “commit . . . the speaker to some future course of action”) have the world-to-word direction of fit, and “declarations” (“utterances that bring about some alteration [in the world] . . . solely by virtue of the declaration being successfully performed”) have both a word-to-world and a world-to-word direction of fit: “You’re fired” changes the world—or at least “your” status in it—by declaring it so changed (*Speech Acts* 12–17). Though my definition does not add a new direction of fit to these three types of acts, it does encourage attention to possible layers of implicit and indirect performativity, to a deeper understanding of what it means for the act to be successful and why it might have been uttered in the first place.

Looking (finally!) at examples of humor, what Freud calls the “harmless” joke—“a witticism without a tendency” (130)—may seem to have no direction of fit. But even harmless humor—take Henny Youngman’s great joke, “I met a hooker who said she’d do anything for fifty bucks. I made her paint my house”—has the modest world-to-word (i.e., world-changing) goal of evoking laughter and the less modest goal of earning the comedian a living. The benign “Did you ever notice . . .” style

of observational humor has a word-to-world direction of fit, as in Erma Bombeck’s line, “Did you ever notice that the first piece of luggage on the carousel never belongs to anyone?” Unless this line has a word-to-world descriptive quality, it won’t elicit the laughter of recognition. But observational humor also has the world-to-word perlocutionary goal of altering the audience’s vision of reality—even when, as in Bombeck’s example, the alteration is minor and benign. We can imagine a continuum of performative observational humor from “Did you ever notice . . .” to vituperative mockery, with mimicry, parody, burlesque, and satire as points in between. Along the way, the world-altering motivation becomes more intense and serious, the literal word-to-world direction of fit often weakens (consider the movement from likeness in mimicry to exaggeration and distortion in mockery), and the perlocutionary effect becomes less purely harmless and pleasurable—and often less predictable and manageable for the speaker.

The specific objects of this analysis are literary representations of humor in dialogue, examples of speakers using humor to perform indirect and/or implicit performatives. There are at least three reasons that might make this seem like a bad idea or at best an odd fit, “a marriage with a monkey,” as Austin would say: speech-act theory’s historical disaffection with dialogue, literature, and humor! I expect the fit to become clearer over the course of this study but will briefly address these apparent discontinuities here. Taking dialogue first, Austin analyzes utterances more formal than those found in the seeming spontaneity and lawlessness of conversation: “I do (sc. take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)” is Austin’s first example of the performative (*How to 5*). Searle asks if we might “get an account that gave us constitutive rules for conversations in a way that we have constitutive rules of speech acts” (*Consciousness and Language* 181). His answer is “no,” because conversation is not bound by, nor constituted in, rules in the way that more formalized speech acts are: there are regulative rules in the sense of conventions and manners, but explicating these rules does not result in a theory of conversation.¹² Yet a formal speech-act theory of conversation is not my goal. Rather, conversation is the context or scene in which we (or our fictional representatives) find ourselves using the indirection and implication of humor to enact performatives: the focus is not on conversation as speech act, but on speech acts in conversation, about which, Searle agrees, speech-act theory can offer “interesting insights” (*Consciousness and Language* 7).

Even Paul Grice, far more interested than Austin or Searle in informal speech, sweeps aside “chitchat” and “chatter” to focus on “aspects of conversational practice which are candidates for evaluation” (369). “Chitchat goes nowhere,” Grice claims, and he dismisses “the really aimless over-the-garden-wall chatter in which most of us from time to time engage” as a “degenerate derivative of the primary talk exchange” (370). Speech-act philosophers and linguists, Mary Louise Pratt complains, too often write “as if small talk, for all its smallness, could be treated as an uninteresting exception” (149–50). Talk—small, tall, loose, idle, cheap, common, “just” talk—lives in the messy, quotidian world of *parole* and is not only difficult to theorize but is generally regarded as trivial chatter next to formal speech, writing, oratory, and other higher (perhaps more masculine) uses of language.

When these linguistic distinctions meet gender distinctions, the result is the diminution of women’s use of language. “When writing comedy,” writes Regina Barreca, “where the unofficial nature of the world is explored (to paraphrase Bakhtin), women are damned to insignificance twice over. They are the unofficial discussing the insignificant” (6). Andrea Ivanov-Craig argues that Dorothy Parker’s work is unfairly marked as “doubly trivial: ‘trivial’ because it is humor, and ‘trivial’ because it concerns the lives and perspectives of women” (232). Women’s humorous talk, then, must be trebly trivial. Or not: For if talk is idle and cheap, why do important and powerful people fear being the talk of the town? If humor is frivolous and nonserious, why is it contained by prohibitions of appropriateness? And if women themselves are trivial and “unofficial,” why is the history of women’s speech a history of socialized, sanctioned silencing? Mahadev Apte writes: “By restricting the freedom of women to engage in and respond to humor in the public domain, men emphasize their need for superiority. Men justify such restrictions by creating ideal role models for women that emphasize modesty, virtue, and passivity” (81).¹³ Language and discourse themselves are subject to this same humorless ideal: an important commonality among women, humor, and talk is that all three are dismissed as trivial while at the same time are deemed potent and threatening enough to warrant restriction through ideals of “virtue” and correctness—whether of gender or grammar.

As for literature, *How to Do Things with Words* (in)famously labels performative utterances spoken on the stage or “introduced in a poem” as “parasitic” upon real-world speech acts: they are “*in a peculiar way*

hollow or void,” neither “normal” nor “serious,” and Austin “deliberately” excludes them from his analysis (22). Elsewhere, both *How to Do Things with Words* and Searle’s *Speech Acts* exclude literature and humor in a simultaneous gesture, raising the ire of those who consider Austin’s and Searle’s treatment of literature as, well, a joke. Truth be told, Austin gives a little more attention to joking than does Searle, revealing Austin’s fascination with the parasitic: whenever Austin bars the door to the peculiar and “etiolated,” it is with an interested and hopeful eye for any oddities that may sneak in and reveal their similarities to the normal and serious:

Let us be quite clear that the expression “use of language” can cover other matters even more diverse than the illocutionary and perlocutionary acts and obviously quite diverse from any with which we are here concerned. For example, we may speak of the “use of language” *for* something, e.g. for joking; and we may use “in” in a very different way from the illocutionary “in,” as when we say “in saying ‘p’ I was joking” or “acting a part” or “writing poetry.” . . . These references to “use of language” having nothing to do with the illocutionary act. . . . There are aetioliations, parasitic uses, etc., various “not serious” and “not full normal” uses. (*How to* 104)

In 1971, with “Signature Event Context,” Derrida challenged Austin’s distinction between the real and the fictional, and since then *How to Do Things with Words* has received as much attention—especially in the fields of performance studies and critical theory—for what it declines to do as for what it does.

I will discuss Austin’s exclusion and the responses to it in chapter 4. For now it is important to understand that, deconstructive objections aside, Austin’s claim that fictional performatives are neither real nor serious is obvious and noncontroversial in the narrow sense Austin intends: we do not take the actor who says, “Master Shallow, I owe you a thousand pound,” to have truly committed himself to a debt. In this respect, performatives uttered in fictional contexts are indeed parasitic upon and derived from real-world discourse. Yet these parasites—and the exact nature of parasitism, of fiction’s dependent relationship upon the real—are not without interest or off limits to speech-act analysis: Searle himself attempts to explain the logical relationship between fictional and factual discourse.¹⁴ In fact, the parasite has become the center of attention in speech-act/performativity theory after Derrida.¹⁵ The relationship of *Wit’s End* to speech-act theory’s initial exclusion of literature is the same

as its relationship to Searle’s exclusion of conversation: in the present study, literature is the scene of the acts, not the act itself. Nor is this study primarily concerned with the performative effect of literature on readers, apart from the assumption that works of literature—as “proverbs writ large”—present us with “strategies” and “attitudes” for addressing recurrent exigencies (Burke, *Philosophy* 297). Rather, I am looking at dialogue that happens to occur in the context of fiction rather than on the street or in someone’s home. What fictional characters do with words should resemble and illuminate what we do with words, and analysis in one scene—fiction or reality—should both inform and be informed by analysis in the other. In short, I think we can learn something about what we do with words by looking at what characters in fiction do with words—and vice versa. In “The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse,” Searle calls “the fictional use of words” a “nondeceptive pseudoperformance,” consisting of pretended illocutionary acts (*Expression and Meaning* 65): “The utterance acts [i.e., the locutions] in fiction are indistinguishable from the utterance acts of serious discourse,” and thus “there is no textual property, syntactical or semantic, that will identify a text as a work of fiction” (68, 65). By this logic, a speech-act analysis of fictional dialogue is just as likely to be fruitful as a speech-act analysis of real-world dialogue in responding to the question, “What do we desire to do, try to do, and succeed or fail to do with words?”

But while speech-act theory has moved past its originators’ disregard for conversation and fiction, it has not to the same extent engaged with humor.¹⁶ Austin himself says: “There is another whole range of questions about ‘how we are using language’ or ‘what we are doing in saying something’ which we have said may be, and intuitively seem to be, entirely different—further matters which we are not trenching upon. For example, there are insinuating (and other *non-literal* uses of language), joking (and other *non-serious* uses of language), and swearing and showing off (which are perhaps expressive uses of language). We can say ‘In saying *x* I was joking’ (insinuating . . . , expressing my feelings, &c.)” (*How to* 122). But why must one not be joking? Does the medium, or tone, or context of humor necessarily render a speech situation parasitic and the speech act therein nonstandard, infelicitous, or void?

Austin’s distinction requires that both the act of joking and the utterance “I was joking” be not in fact “full normal” and full-blown performative speech acts; on the contrary, I hope to have demonstrated by the end

of this book that they are. Austin is making a distinction here between two notions of “using” words, between two different meanings of the phrase, “In saying x I was . . .” That is, the phrase “In saying x I was joking” does not describe a sort of “in saying” that is on all fours with “the illocutionary ‘in’” of “In saying x I was giving a command,” or “making a promise,” and so on. Searle mentions joking prior to laying out the necessary and sufficient conditions for the formal act of promising. His first condition states that “normal input and output conditions obtain,” such that “the speaker and hearer both know how to speak the language; both are conscious of what they are doing; they have no physical impediments to communication . . . ; and they are not acting in a play or telling jokes, etc.” (*Speech Acts* 57). Since “telling jokes” keeps company here with play-acting—not to mention various physical and cognitive impediments—joking for Searle means *not* meaning what is said, not uttering words seriously. It is true that telling jokes, like acting in a play, gets us off the hook in terms of some of the commitments and obligations our words entail: “I swear, this is a true story,” if said by someone launching into a joke, is not a serious oath like “I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” in a court of law. But it is wrong to say that joke-telling is not performative speech. A professional comedian telling jokes is, for example, satisfying Austin’s felicity condition $\Gamma.2$, requiring appropriate subsequent conduct on the part of a participant (*How to* 15): the comedian has committed to perform in the capacity of a comedian, and the performance fulfills that promise.

Austin insists that words are commitments: “accuracy and morality alike are on the side of the plain saying that *our word is our bond*” (*How to* 10). We are expected to mean what we say. Likewise for Searle, a felicitous promise must satisfy the “sincerity condition,” the speaker’s committed intention to follow through on the words “I promise” (*Speech Acts* 60). Both philosophers are correct that promises and many other performatives assume the seriousness and sincerity of the speaker; and on first glance, sincerity and seriousness may seem absent from humorous utterances. Further, neither humor in general nor jokes in particular are direct, explicit performatives alongside the promise, the bet, the declaration, and the command: I cannot say, “I amuse you,” and have it be so. Yet humor does not necessarily—or even usually—undermine the speech act it conveys. Though humor, as an indirect speech act and a play with words, often divorces what is said (“word meaning”) from what is meant

(“speaker meaning”),¹⁷ this divorce does not cause the speech act to fail, nor does it render speaker meaning insincere, trivial, or even necessarily ambiguous. On the contrary, we can successfully perform serious, sincere, intentional performative acts of all sorts—promises, threats, vows, bets, declarations, all of them—via humor. Neither Searle nor Austin explicitly says otherwise, but neither investigates such acts, either. If the question we are asking is, “What are the necessary and sufficient linguistic and social components of the act of promising?” or, “How is a promise different from a threat?” it makes sense to focus initially on standard, formal, sincere, direct, nonironic promises. In fact, it is precisely humor’s shifty character that compels Austin to quarantine it with the other parasites, those “peculiar” instances of language “used not seriously” (*How to* 22). But as an example of speech that acts, of words that do something, humor is obviously and powerfully active and rhetorical. Recall Austin’s first example of a performative: “I do (sc. take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)” (5). In *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud cites Jean Paul Richter’s image of wit as “the disguised priest who unites every couple” and Friedrich Vischer’s reply that “he likes best to unite those couples whose marriage the relatives refuse to sanction” (7). It seems fitting that the present speech-act study of humor is itself the fruit of just such a disfavored union. And since humor’s tendency is to go where it doesn’t belong or hasn’t been invited, this study confronts these prohibitions and makes its case for the fertile potential of the union of speech-act theory and the language of humor. In the interest of developing a systematic theory, it makes sense for Austin and Searle to exclude the ambiguous, the fictional, the nonserious. But as a verbal strategy that recognizes and employs the play and ambiguity between word meaning and speaker meaning, humor is ideally suited for the performance of indirect speech acts, and speech-act analysis is ideally suited for answering the questions “What can humor do, and how well does it do it?” For what other form of speech is so clearly both a performative and a performance, an act of using words to affect one’s status, relationships, and context (doing things through words) while also drawing attention to oneself as a verbal performer (doing things to words)?

As a play with words and a strategy of indirect performativity, humor does not—or does not only—mean and do what it seems to say. This multivalent quality accounts for humor’s elusiveness and its resistance to rule-based analysis, but also for its great potential and adaptability as a

performative strategy. In spite of its seeming exclusion from *How to Do Things with Words* (I say “seeming” because I will question in chapter 4 whether the exclusion actually takes place), humor can sneak into Austin’s formal gathering of speech acts through at least two back doors. First, in the middle of his effort to establish the rules of the performative, Austin acknowledges the importance of *breaking* the rules: “Getting away with things is essential, despite the suspicious terminology” (30). It is through breaking the rules that we initiate new performative procedures. The second opening is even more inviting to humor and other marginal, fringe, and defective performatives and even more of a validation that they belong in the analysis and deserve the title of performatives: “Clearly *any*, or almost any, perlocutionary act is liable to be brought off, in sufficiently special circumstances, by the issuing, with or without calculation, of any utterance whatsoever” (110). It is amazing to me that, amid all the objections to Austin’s act of banishing the parasitic, etiolated, and nonserious, little or no attention is paid to this crucial passage in which he seems, with the other hand, to let them back in. To be fair to Austin’s meaning, he says the above in the context of distinguishing performatives from their perlocutionary effects: he is not saying that, therefore, every utterance with perlocutionary effects is a performative nor even arguing for a definition of the performative as broad as my own, above. Yet as his analysis evolves through trial and error, Austin does admit that “the notion of the purity of performatives” “will not survive” (150), at least not in “real life, as opposed to the simple situations envisaged in logical theory” (143). Instead, “the total speech act in the total speech situation is the *only actual* phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating” (148). And Austin’s distinction between performative illocutions and their perlocutionary effects weakens both in the real world and through the course of *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin writes, “The locutionary act as much as the illocutionary is an abstraction only: every genuine speech act is both” (147). Can we say the same of illocutionary and perlocutionary acts? Not to the same degree: the distinction between what I say and how people respond is not a mere abstraction. But from the beginning of *How to Do Things with Words*, perlocutionary effect is inextricable from both the necessary conditions and the very definition of the performative: Austin’s necessary conditions involve both the effects of the words and the future conduct of participants (14–15), and the essential fact of performatives is that they are words that *do* something, that create, perpetuate, or alter social reality.

Why Use Humor?

The use of performative humor in dialogue invites the question: “Why?” Why perform indirect speech acts through humor, instead of just playing/saying it straight? Searle notes that propriety often compels us to use indirect speech acts: “Could you pass the salt?” rather than “Pass the salt.”¹⁸ But propriety discourages the use of humor more often than it requires it, so we must look for explanations in other social conventions and demands. What interpersonal, social, or political aspects of a particular scene or exigence might make humor seem the most strategic, potentially felicitous form of speech? Why might certain speakers, particularly those of marginalized status *as* speakers, choose the indirection of humor, and what does it say about humor’s potency that its use by marginalized speakers—women, for instance—is often discouraged as inappropriate?

It would be a mistake to consider humor and other indirect speech acts as second-rate strategies, used only when more direct, explicit expression is for some reason not an option; for there are some important linguistic exchanges and shared understandings that cannot be achieved with direct, explicit speech acts. Most relevant to the current study is the rhetoric of “courtship,” defined broadly by Burke as “persuasion by identification” and “the use of suasive devices for the transcending of social estrangement” (*Rhetoric* 177, 208). We cannot say, for example, with much hope of performative felicity, “Admire me,” “Accept me,” or “Love me.” But the obstacle facing language that seeks to establish a reciprocity of feeling is not the absence of the right locutions. The obstacle is that we do not have direct world-to-word authority over other people’s feelings; simply put, we cannot tell other people what to feel. I can declare my own feelings and say, “I want you to love me,” but that won’t make it so. It is simply a fact, a paradoxical or even ironic fact, that the fundamental goal of rhetoric (broadly understood), that of forging “identification” or “consubstantiality,”¹⁹ may be best accomplished indirectly, through the back and forth of informal dialogue containing indirect and implicit performative speech, through the profoundly important undercurrents of talk that may seem to be doing something else on the surface. And since humor is often characterized by these same qualities of indirection and implication, and the play between surface meanings and undercurrents, humor should be a potent strategy for establishing consubstantiality. According to Freud, “To laugh over the same witticisms is a proof of

absolute psychic agreement” (233); Ted Cohen believes that “a deep satisfaction in successful joke transactions is the sense held mutually by teller and hearer that they are joined in feeling” (25). So we can begin to answer the question “Why use humor?” with another question: “Why might one want to experience psychic agreement, to be joined in feeling with the person we are addressing?” Putting the question thus, it becomes difficult to imagine a rhetorical situation where we might *not* use humor. We may find ourselves admired, accepted, even loved—taken seriously, we might say—if we are agile and engaging with humor, and in some cases our use of humor may well be the indirect performative equivalent to “Admire me,” “Accept me,” or “Love me.” So as a motivated strategy of “persuasion by identification,” humor is not only performative but powerfully rhetorical. Powerful but, like any speech act, susceptible to failure.

This question of “Why?” takes us into issues of motives, into rhetorical, psychological, and cultural analyses, and thus away from a direct philosophical engagement with Austin. For *How to Do Things with Words* is not concerned with psychology or politics, nor with race, class, or gender. This is not meant as a criticism: Austin is doing philosophy in 1955, not critical theory or cultural studies in 2010. After citing the matrimonial “I do” as an example of a performative, Austin does not interrogate its implication in perpetuating patriarchy. His example “I give and bequeath my watch to my brother” does not lead to a discussion of private property and class or inheritance and gender. Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, J. Hillis Miller—and, at times, Derrida—have taken performativity theory in those very directions and criticized Austin for not doing so. Fifty years after Austin gave the lectures that became *How to Do Things with Words*, the fact that these compelling and often contentious voices continue to invigorate the study of performativity endorses the value of the theory as a lens, a terministic screen, for analyzing matters of politics, ideology, and identity, even though these concerns were not Austin’s. The shift in analytical attention from idealized, apolitical utterances to enactments of ideologically charged words and deeds characterizes both the connection and the distinctions between early speech-act and current performativity theories: theorists are less likely now to be asking, “What are the felicity conditions of a marriage ceremony?” than, “To what extent does uttering the matrimonial ‘I do’ implicate the speaker in the perpetuation of patriarchy and heteronormativity?” If the minister says, “I now pronounce you man and wife,” does the his-

torical momentum of matrimonial patriarchy predetermine the woman’s “I do”—regardless of what she herself thinks she is doing and saying—as meaning, “I do consent to become this man’s property”? And if the groom is pronounced “man,” does that mean that he was previously something else—a boy, perhaps—implying that an unmarried man is not really a man? Who or what determines what new social reality is created through this ritual: the couple, the person invested with authority, the witnesses, the words themselves? Austin analyzed the means by which the uttering of a few words can be—not just describe or stand for, but *be*—the execution of an act. “Words do things in a social setting,” writes Sandy Petrey, “and Austin made sociality so prominent in Rule A.1 because it’s the foundation on which every other rule is erected” (6). If we consider not just performative language but all the language-based social realities that performative language brings into being, we can redirect Austin’s analysis and employ his terminology in the spirit of social critique: since performatives are mutable, the logical necessity and inevitability that exist in idealized linguistic models need not obtain in society and its constructs. As makers and users of language, we can interrogate and intervene upon those performative acts that derive their power from the conventionality with which we have invested them and lose their power when we collectively act to withdraw it.

To be sure, the relationship between performatives and the status quo is one of mutual reinforcement: both Austin and Searle make it clear that to successfully perform a performative, one must follow the rules. But Searle notes²⁰ that the creation of a rule creates as well the corresponding violation, and as noted above, Austin stresses the inevitability, in fact the necessity, of breaking the rules and getting away with it:

Suppose, for example, I see a vessel on the stocks, walk up and smash the bottle hung at the stem, proclaim “I name this ship the *Mr. Stalin*” and for good measure kick away the chocks: but the trouble is, I was not the person chosen to name it (whether or not—an additional complication—*Mr. Stalin* was the destined name; perhaps in a way it is even more of a shame if it was). We can all agree

- (1) that the ship was not thereby named;
- (2) that it is an infernal shame. (*How to* 23)

Though Austin calls this performative application of mischievous humor “a mockery, a marriage with a monkey,” if I (or you, or Austin) were to ac-

tually get away with it, we would not only, as far as everyone knows, succeed in (mis)naming the ship (since to “get away with” something *means* to succeed), we would succeed as well in exposing the conventionality and the fragility of procedures and assumptions regarding authority, rights, and privileges, as well as procedures and assumptions regarding speaking and naming. Performative humor is thus not only a strategy for speaking but a form of knowing—a methodology and an epistemology. By playing with speech acts and bending or breaking rules, performative humor can create new individual, interpersonal, and social perspectives, new terministic screens, from heterogeneous bits of language, authority, and context, forging new connections between words and meanings and also between speakers and listeners. Humor, Freud writes, “is the most social of all psychic functions whose aim is to gain pleasure” (286). When humor’s aim is performative and not just pleasure-seeking, it has the potential held by all performatives to (re)construct social reality itself.

“Only” Joking?

Austin says of his initial constative/performative distinction, “To issue a constative utterance is to make a statement,” whereas in the case of a performative, “The uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action” (*How to* 5, 6n). What about the utterance, “I’m only joking”? It appears to be “only” a factual description—the speaker’s constative description of his or her own speech act—rather than a performative creation or alteration of some state of affairs. But of course the punch line, as it were, of *How to Do Things with Words* is the collapse of the constative/performative distinction, and I have suggested we define a performative as an act of communication, linguistic or otherwise, having a world-to-word—or world-to-symbol/gesture—direction of fit, toward some perlocutionary effect. In the case of “I’m only joking,” experience endorses this definition in that our fluency in everyday conversational contexts makes us suspicious of the claim that “I’m only joking” is simply an objective description, a constative statement of “fact.” Are we ever “only” joking? Though Freud makes a distinction between “harmless wit”—it’s just a joke—and purposeful “tendency wit,” he believes that “wit is really never purposeless” (203). And what circumstances would impel us to try to declare that we are only joking? What sort of kinetic, performative energy does humor catalyze that might make us anxious to reign it in with this paradoxical pseudoconstative? Paradoxical in that “I’m only joking” is a

declaration—and thus clearly performative—and because the last thing we want to call an utterance if we wish it to be taken as constative and as clear and undivided in its meaning (or else as completely meaningless) is a joke: there is nothing “only” about humor.

Like joking, “I’m only joking” is itself a performative, a “saying something” that is also a “doing something”: it is an attempt by a speaker to declare as merely harmless wit an utterance or gesture experienced by the audience as tendency wit, an attempt to erase an undesired or unintended perlocutionary effect or to declare oneself blameless in the causation of that perlocution. We could also say that “I’m only joking” is an attempt (a conventional one, in fact) to declare a normal, conventional, serious speech act parasitic and nonserious. To get an initial sense of just how complicated a dynamic these three little words are capable of enacting, imagine that the scene is a candlelit table for two in a romantic restaurant, where a couple are celebrating their anniversary. A close analysis of this scene demonstrates why humor deserves to be taken seriously as a speech act and why at the same time it resists the sort of definitive analysis and categorization attempted with other performatives by Austin and Searle. The wife tells the waiter, “I’ll have the chocolate cake.” Her husband responds, “Aren’t you on a diet, darling?” then turns to the waiter and says, “Nothing for me.” Next comes the perlocutionary result of the husband’s illocutionary act, namely an expression on the wife’s face that the husband identifies as shame and embarrassment mixed with anger. After the waiter departs, the husband says to his wife, “I was only joking.” I feel confident (especially since I created this scenario) in saying that the husband is not here simply naming his prior speech act, nor is it likely that the prior speech act was “only” (or even) a joke. As an illocutionary act, as motivated intentional speech, “Aren’t you on a diet?” is an indirect performative of one or more of the following types:

- A directive: “You are not to order the cake.”
- A declaration: “I am in control of my wife’s eating behavior” or a more general declaration and affirmation of the authority vested in him by the title of “husband.”
- A criticism: Disapproval of the woman’s behavior and/or appearance and his desire to control them.
- An act of defining the terms, in several senses: “Aren’t you on a diet?” defines the scene, first, by reducing it to an either/or situation and, second, through the fallacy of the complex question: that is, to answer “yes” is to

admit that ordering the cake is a shameful choice, a failure of will, while to answer “no” is to admit that one has fallen off the diet wagon. This is the dietary version of “Have you stopped beating your wife?”

- An indirect expression and projection of the man’s own anxieties: His pants, purchased just two months prior, are now so tight that he has lost all sensation below the waist.
- One or more of the above, validated by a witness: The man’s act of control is reinforced in this scene by the waiter, who merely by being present is unwittingly cast in the role of witness to the man’s authority, in a two-against-one situation. By means of such triangulation, Freud observes, the first person (in this case, the husband) “develops a hostile attitude toward the second person [typically a woman] and takes the originally intruding third person as his confederate” (145). But as Sedgwick points out, there is opportunity for “the dragooned witness to disinterpellate” (*Touching Feeling* 70): that is, the third person—the waiter—can undermine the husband’s performative of control by saying, “Don’t skip dessert on my account,” thus renouncing his unwanted complicity.

Is it possible that “Aren’t you on a diet?” really is “just” a direct speech act, is “only” what it appears to be: a genuine question, a sincere request for information, unburdened by any implied judgment or implicit cues directing the woman toward the “correct” answer? It seems highly unlikely: if the woman lives in our culture and is not a size zero (or even if she is), she does not need to be reminded to think about her weight. Although “Aren’t you on a diet?” looks like a request for information, I doubt that any competent participant in our social scene would claim that’s all it is. Our competence as speech actors depends upon an awareness that speech acts are context-dependent, an awareness that meaning is “radically scenic.”²¹ Formal characteristics alone—the fact that the locution “Aren’t you on a diet?” takes the form of a question—are insufficient to fully determine a speech act’s contextual meaning. Searle’s “idealized models” of illocutionary acts are rarely enacted in ideal form on the social stage, and Searle himself acknowledges the inadequacy of his initial definition of a question as just a request for information (*Speech Acts* 56).

Furthermore, we have likely all experienced the difference between curiosity, which desires a response, and interrogation, which demands

an answer, often an answer predetermined as correct by the questioner. In the former case, the questioner acknowledges that the authority—the power of knowledge—resides in the respondent, while the latter case is a performance of power by the inquisitor. Whatever the husband may be consciously and/or unconsciously trying to do with words, the perlocutionary effect is to constrain the woman’s pleasure and agency: he has set the stage for whatever dessert act she chooses to make, and as a result, what would have been an independent assertion on her part is now set up to be merely a response, a reply rather than a statement.

No less complex is the husband’s attempt, upon seeing the impact of his first utterance, to protect himself by trying to appropriate the broad license allowed by humor, which he tries to do by saying, “I was only joking.” This speech act could be, among other things:

- A retraction: “I didn’t mean it.”
- A declaration: An assertion of authority, through the powerful act of naming (“I declare my previous utterance a joke”). This declaration further asserts that the perlocutionary effect of the speech act on the woman is irrelevant in determining the act’s identity: the speaker’s intention unilaterally determines—fully “saturates,” to use Derrida’s expression—the meaning of the utterance.
- A denouncement: An invalidation of the woman’s reaction as an inappropriate response (“You have nothing to be upset about”).
- A criticism: Of her worldview, not to mention her inability “to take a joke.” Joanna Russ interprets “It was only a joke” as “I find jokes about you funny. Why don’t *you* find jokes about you funny?” (180).
- An apology: Albeit an inept and formally defective apology, demonstrating more than anything else the man’s inability or unwillingness to perform a mutually recognized and accepted formal apology. As an apology without humility, it better serves to maintain the man’s position of power than to acknowledge the negative perlocutionary effect of his words.
- A directive: “Don’t be angry,” which is perhaps a posture behind which cowers a plea: “Please don’t be angry with me.”
- An assertion of autonomy and emotional distance.
- The replication of the paternal act of quieting a child and thus an attempt to preempt the woman’s adult speech rights.

- A directive: “Silence!” An act of preempting the woman’s ability to speak or act with autonomy, analogous to what seemed, at first glance, like a trivial act of attempting to limit her dessert choices.

If the woman allows the framework imposed by the man’s performative to determine the communicative possibilities, she may respond passive-aggressively by declining any dessert, submissively by acquiescing to his authority and ordering sorbet, or defiantly by ordering the chocolate cake (*à la mode*).

Now much of this exhaustive (and I hope not too exhausting) analysis of a simple little conversation is erased if we change the shared experience, the background knowledge, within which the couple perform and communicate. Imagine that since childhood, the woman was badgered by her mother to go on a diet. If the husband delivers his line as a parody of his mother-in-law, it could be intended by him and received by his wife as an act of solidarity against a common irritant. Still other layers of intention and background may be in play: the man’s performance of his mother-in-law may yet be tinged with some of the desire for control seen in the previous analysis, in which case his donning of a humorous mask is an act of “pretending” in both the common and the etymological senses of the word: to imitate but also to conceal one’s self behind some sort of covering as a defense. He may be joking, but he is not “only” joking.

Returning again to the original scenario but attending this time to the woman’s perspective, “I was only joking” is perhaps most significantly a lie. Although “Aren’t you on a diet?” is an indirect speech act, there is no self-evident humor, no play of words. So while the woman could respond with, “No, I’m not on a diet,” this dissatisfying response would not be in any way empowering: it keeps her in the defensive, subordinate, response-ive position. To answer the question at all is to take the man’s speech at face value, ignoring the implied speech act and its implicit performative demand for a world-to-word direction of fit: the demand that the woman’s behavior fall into line with the man’s unspoken criticism. She would thus be relenting to his construction of their interpersonal dynamic, a construction that affirms his authorship of their exchanges and thus his authority as inquisitor and affirms her subordinate position as the person compelled not only to answer but to answer—and act—correctly and appropriately. One way to subvert this dynamic would be to respond not to the question “Aren’t you on a diet?” but to the statement “I was only joking”: “No you weren’t,” she might fairly say. With this act,

the woman puts herself in the position of authority as the one who names the speech act: “No you weren’t” is not a defensive response but an assertive challenge, and as such—as a claim about the man’s intentions—“No you weren’t” now places the man in the defensive, subordinate, responsive position, challenged to confront—perhaps even to admit—some of the layers of implication in his speech acts. For “I was only joking” was also an attempt on his part to stop the conversation, apparently for good reason as regards the man’s sense of authority: it seems from the scenario in this paragraph that if the hearer can draw the speaker further in to conversation, the speaker’s power is likely to be threatened. To don the mask of humor, or to claim to do so after the fact by asserting “I was only joking,” can thus also be an act of self-preservation, a shorthand expression for “I declare a gap between the intended and the literal meanings of my words, between what I said (‘the truth’) and what you heard (‘your misinterpretation’).” And though we cannot underestimate the necessity and importance of a speaker’s intentionality in the enactment of successful performatives, intention alone is never fully determinate: speech acts are contextual, social transactions, in which the scene and all the actors collaborate to enact a shared sense of meaning—or else contend with one another to challenge and resist such agreements. So as much as the husband might wish it to be so, he cannot unilaterally determine the nature and effects of his performative, though he may be able to exert enough power to enforce acquiescence and preclude the challenges of alternative interpretations and engagements.

Given all the complexities in this very brief conversational exchange, it becomes clear why Austin and Searle, the former taking the first steps into new territory in the philosophy of language and the latter looking to codify the necessary and sufficient rules for various types of performatives, avoided direct contact with informal discourse and the parasite of humor. Before outlining the necessary conditions for a felicitous act of promising, Searle defends his method of “constructing idealized models” and ignoring the “marginal, fringe, and partially defective”: “This method . . . is analogous to the sort of theory construction that goes on in most sciences, e.g., the construction of economic models, or accounts of the solar system which treat planets as points. Without abstraction and idealization, there is no systematization” (*Speech Acts* 56). Though I appreciate Searle’s argument for idealization, I see a different similarity between the study of performative language in dialogue and the study of

astronomy or economics: the map is not the landscape. Mars is not really a point-mass, and Searle and Austin acknowledge that performative acts, such as oaths, promises, threats, and the like, need not follow all the formal points of the model in order to be effective; they can also be accomplished through “elliptical turns of phrase [might we say orbits?], hints, metaphors, etc.” (*Speech Acts* 55–56), as demonstrated above by my unhappily married couple. Yes, we participate in oaths, christenings, marriage ceremonies, sentencings, and other highly formalized performatives, and it is thus reasonable for Searle, given his goal of formalizing speech-act conventions, to set aside the mysterious fringes of the linguistic universe and focus his analysis on “the center of the concept” (55). Searle the philosopher excludes from study the marginal, fringe, and defective; in the English Department, we love the marginal, fringe, and defective—the “other.” Disciplinary differences aside, a speech act is a linguistic attempt to do something, and since most of our quotidian acts of communication are not highly formalized, the informal is not insignificant. And while the establishment of linguistic or astronomical laws is a remarkable and empowering achievement, it is nevertheless the lawless, mysterious, and baffling events that fire our curiosity and remind us to laugh at our humble mortal capacities.

Back to the couple celebrating their anniversary: more interesting than the question of how to classify their speech acts is the question of what the people do, attempt to do, and fail to do through language. What is sought and/or achieved through the husband’s actual or asserted use of humor? And with the multivalent complexity of even this very brief example, how are communication and understanding even/ever possible? A person may perform the formal vow “till death do us part” only once or twice, but the miscommunication in our day-to-day talk is truly the tie that *binds*, that keeps us apart and brings us together: talk is the humbling bind that we, with our imperfect abilities of expression, find ourselves in; yet talk also binds us with one another as we struggle together, through acts of speech, toward a degree of rhetorical consubstantiality, of performative and affective happiness, which we can never fully attain.²² As seen from this perspective—from the front lines in the daily interpersonal struggle of words—the informal, indirect, and imperfect acts are “the center,” with the formal, direct, or idealized cases the marginal exceptions. Talk, as Erving Goffman aptly describes it, “is like a structural midden, a refuse heap in which bits and oddments of all the

ways of framing activity in culture are to be found” (*Frame Analysis* 499). Sifting through this refuse heap—to continue Goffman’s imagery—is the *bricoleur*, defined by Derrida as follows:

The *bricoleur*, says Levi-Strauss, is someone who uses “the means at hand,” that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous—and so forth. There is therefore a critique of language in the form of *bricolage*, and it has even been possible to say that *bricolage* is the critical language itself.²³

What the *bricoleur* does with tools and found objects, the humorist does with words, reclaiming, adapting, altering, de- and recontextualizing them to serve new expressive, rhetorical, and performative goals. (And further to the point of this quotation from Derrida, I will argue in chapters 4 and 5 that humor is a critical language.) To understand humor as a performative strategy is to acknowledge the complex relationship between the word and the world, a relationship in which the actors on the social stage have a significant degree of agency, while facing significant challenges, in essaying to shape and reshape the language, thus and in turn shaping and reshaping individual ideology, interpersonal relationships, and broader social realities.