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From a *Misfire* to an *Open Future*: Repetition, Performativity and the Promise of the Metaphor

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This article deals with the notion of performativity through the work of J.L. Austin, Shoshana Felman, and, most significantly, Judith Butler. It examines the intertextual references of the work of the mentioned theorists mainly through the notion of promise *which is used as an example, a metaphor, but also as an organizing principle of the performative logic of their texts.*

Introduction

Recent theoretical developments in the humanities are characterized by a growing interdisciplinarity. The late 20th century has brought about many issues that have altered the pure canonical concepts of clearly delineated fields of research in philosophy, linguistics, sociology or psychology. As many contemporary theorists have noticed, the emergence of what Shannon Jackson calls the P-words, i.e. performative, performance and performativity, have strongly marked this interdisciplinary development, questioning many of the previously established definitions (and oppositions) of theory and practice, academy and politics, fiction and "reality" (Jackson, Lloyd). This article focuses on the texts of three theorists – John L. Austin, Shoshana Felman, and Judith Butler - in order to trace not only the points of convergence but also the way in which these points enabled a certain enchainment of ideas related to the concept of performativity. As I intend to show, these intertextual references revolve around the idea of repetition as their pivotal point and often rely on the cluster of similar underlying notions. Focusing on the notion of promise - as a figure, an example, or an organizing metaphor, this article traces the idea of subject outlined in the work of the abovementioned theorists. More precisely, it offers an insight into the evolution of the theory of performativity by following the idea of repeated failure, or, in Austin's terms, *misfire*, in keeping promises. Furthermore, the article suggests the possibility of interpreting Butler's work on performativity through the same figure – as a (politically) promising performative act which has reshaped the whole field of gender studies.

Whereas the notion of the performative is typically associated with Austin's work, Felman's interpretation of his work has introduced psychoanalytical and deconstructive perspectives into this concept. In her book *The Scandal of the Speaking Body* (2003), Felman alludes to Austin's long-term impact not only on modern linguistics and the philosophy of language, but also on the much larger field of critical theory. The object of her inquiry was partially to analyse the reception of Austin's theory by some of his most fervent critics, such as Searle, Katz and Benveniste (99). In addition, she examined the criticism made by key contemporary thinkers such as Jacques Derrida. Felman, however, decided to approach Austin's work on language through a literary trope inspired by Molière's

Don Juan, implying, thus, that this could be a more appropriate way to asses Austin's delicate and ambiguous work, located at the crossroads of two different disciplines. Instead of asking *what was Austin saying*, she was much more interested in answering the question of "*what Austin was doing with what he was saying*' (49, emphasis my own). The question itself stresses the performative dimension of his theory of *Performative Utterances*, which outlines the idea of repetition and self-referential status of speech acts as central to the concept of performativity.

While Austin mainly analyses the concept of promise as a speech act approaching it from the perspective of the failure, Felman's usage of the expression is the most metaphorical in the conventional sense. In Butler's work, however, the word is used as a specific rhetorical tool that, as I will argue in this article, organizes the internal dynamic of her writing, demonstrating some of its extraordinary metaphoric density. I have chosen to focus on Butler's use of the word "promise" not only because of its metaphoric potential, but also because its meaning is permeated with all the inconsistencies and ambiguities of a speech act that inspired Austin's question of *How to Do Things with Words*.[1]

From Theory to Politics: How Did the Promise 'Become' Political?

One of the crucial moments in Austin's theory is a division of all utterances (speech acts) into two groups: *constatives*, which report on reality, and *performatives*, which potentially change it. Altogether with these notions Austin has introduced a completely new criterion in the theory of language – the one of felicity/infelicity – and points to the relevance of the context, i.e. precisely to those elements that will be the most significant for the future reading of his work by queer theorists (Parker and Sedgwick, Keith) . Namely, Austin has initially departed from the idea that certain speech acts – primarily but not exclusively the performatives – are prone to a failure or a "misfire", referring therefore to their "infelicity"; not as inherent feature of the speech act itself, but rather to the circumstances under which it is performed. Thus, in his examples a *misfire* becomes the paradigm for "unhappy" or "infelicitous" speech acts, which, for some reason fail to produce the intended consequences.

What seems at first glance a characteristic of Austin's example of promise as one of the cases of the performative speech acts, is its exposure not only to a "misfire" but also to another "unhappy" possibility – the one of abuse. However, Austin excludes this possibility from his further research in order to focus on proper cases of performatives. What he examines, instead, is the intentionality of the promise. A person that makes a promise ought to be inspired by the intention to fulfil it. However, according to Austin, a false intention does not annul the previously given promise, for even a fake promise (if believed by the person intended, i.e. if happily performed) brings about some consequences. "Without effect", in Austin's interpretation, does not mean without consequences or without results: "Yet so to speak is *not* to say that the utterance 'I promise that...' is false, in the sense

that though he states that he does, he doesn't or that though he describes he misdescribes – misreports" (Austin 11).

Interestingly, while analysing different possibilities of failure, Austin announces the problem of the agent's responsibility, reducing it (if the intention is not brought into question) to a matter of inappropriate circumstances (9). This is even more obvious in Austin's positing of the theatrical use of language as "parasitical" and considering those cases as examples of linguistic "etiolations", in which the performative dimension of an utterance fails to produce the effect that it is presumed to have (22). Thus, the act of promising involves a certain way of *thinking and acting*: the person who makes a promise is obligated to think that what he/she promises is feasible, and that also might include thinking that "the promisee thinks it to be to his advantage, or [...] that it is to his advantage" (41). The multiple levels of implications (and expectations) including both actors in the scene of promising; complicate the notion of intentionality even further. Finally, Austin comes to the conclusion that the difference between statements and performative utterances may not be so significant, since no criterion seems appropriate to justify the shaky distinction between performatives and constatives.

In Derrida's essay "Signature, Event, Context", which deals precisely with issues raised by Austin's theory of performative utterances,   Austin's attempts to establish an account of communication as an exclusively linguistic (i.e. symbolic) concept are brought into question. Instead of perceiving the cases of infelicity as accidental and exterior to the (performative) act, Derrida insists on the structural status of the inner logic of the failure. He wonders "what is a success when the possibility of infelicity continues to constitute its structure?" (15). ("Qu'est-ce qu'une réusssite quand la possibilité de l'échec continue de constitue sa structure ? ", "Signature, événement, contexte" 385). In this regard, Austin's exclusions of the "non-ordinary", "non-serious", or "parasitic" use of language, such as acting or reading a poem, actually exclude from his analysis the possibility of quoting, which is in Derrida's view the very condition of any modality of speech, i.e. the condition of using language. Thus, Derrida engages with an attempt to radically resignify Austin's notion of infelicity: what Austin was inclined to perceive as a "relatively pure" performative utterance is, according to Derrida, only another type of citation, though significantly different from a theatrical one, as well as from a quotation of a philosophical reference or a recitation of a poem.

Considering that all social convention demands repeating in order to function, Derrida insisted precisely on the notion of iterability, which he perceived as a way to decontextualisation. The mechanism of iterability introduces certain discontinuities in the term, clefts [*dehiscences*] that, as Derrida would put it, result in distancing (or making *différance*) from its previous context and from the intended meaning. This spacing inevitably distances the speaker from the intention of his speaking, and therefore from the "metaphysical origins [of his doing]: the ethical and teleological discourse of consciousness" ("Signature Event Context" 18). ("de mêmes origines métaphysique : discours éthique et téléologique de la conscience", "Signature, événement, contexte" 389). Therefore, analogically to written texts, or to the functioning of any sign, performative utterance is citational in its structure, and due to this repetition every mark becomes structurally independent from the context

in which it was articulated. Moreover, if the risk of failure is inherent to the speech act itself, it is precisely this failure that enables the very condition of their repeatability.

Thus, the Derridian interpretation of the notion of citationality as a *mimesis without end* invokes at least two different meanings – on the one hand, *without end* could be taken as a temporal (and spatial) infinity of the possibilities of citation, and on the other, *without end* means without finality, or without possibility of subjecting it fully to the purpose. Because a word or a notion contains the repressed difference, which keeps coming back in the repetitive process of signification, any performative fails to be identical with the norms of legitimacy, distancing itself from it.

It is precisely this gap between the meaning of a speech-act and its own reference that will inspire Felman's interpretation of Austin's work. Her arguments on the performative character of Austin's work are supported by her own reading of Molière's theatre play *Don Juan*, which can be understood as an alteration of two conceptions of language. The first conception is a cognitive one (or even a "constative" one, according to Austin's terms), implying that language is an instrument to transmit the truth, it is the knowledge of the "real", based on a presumption of a perfect symmetry between a statement and its reference. According to this view, an utterance can be true or false. The second conception of language that Don Juan's character largely exploits is clearly a performative one, according to which saying something actually means or implies not *knowing*, but *doing* something. Thus, all the "misunderstandings" between Don Juan and the other characters in the piece are due to these two opposite linguistic conceptions. In Felman's opinion, giving promises (and not keeping them) is a way of playing with the self-referential status of one's own saying (and doing):

> Now, if the "Austin effect" is, historically, an effect of "pleasure" (an effect of seduction) *and* an effect of misreading or incomprehension, it is because the misunderstanding itself stems from logic – from a pre-eminently performative logic [...] The history of ideas is thus a chain of acts that is, at the same time, a chain of errors. [...] If the error is "excusable", it is because this error arises, in fact, from the logic of acts. (*The Scandal of the Speaking Body* 99-100)

> Or, si l'"effet Austin" est, historiquement, un effet de "plaisir" (un effet de séduction) *et* un effet de méconnaissance ou d'incompréhension, c'est parce que le malentendu relève lui-même d'une logique – d'une logique performative, s'il en fut. [...] L'histoire des idées est ainsi une chaîne d'actes qui est, en même temps, une chaîne d'erreurs. [...] Si l'erreur est "excusable", c'est parce qu'elle relève, justement, de la logique de l'acte. (*Le Scandale du corps parlant* 196-197)

Providing numerous examples related mainly to the etymology of the word *constative*, Felman interprets the character of Don Juan as someone who is repeatedly 'promising the constative'. Being the "mythical seducer'" Don Juan makes promises that are almost exclusively promises of marriage. However, he repeatedly violates the institution of marriage. So, if marriage is after all (merely) a promise it is, then, likely to be a promise of *constancy*, of consequence or consequentiality, a promise

of continuity between the moment of engagement and future acts. However, Don Juan is, as Felman puts it, mythically "inconstant" (*The Scandal of the Speaking Body* 21) (*Le Scandale du corps parlant* 46*)*. In this view, fidelity figures as the acceptance of the end, of death. Don Juan's eroticism is, therefore, related to death and the boundary between life and death, which he repeatedly trespasses. Every failure to keep his promise motivates another promise, which is, contrary to Benveniste's insistence on the uniqueness of performatives, responsible for the subversion of "being unique." Don Juan subverts the authority of the first person: "The Don Juan myth is in effect the myth of the promise of consciousness falling flat on its face." (*The Scandal of the Speaking Body* 34) ("Le mythe de Don Juan est, en réalité, le mythe du nez cassé de la promesse de conscience", *Le Scandale du corps parlant* 70). Eventually, the end of the play itself enacts the same principle of repeating – the triple ending itself deconstructing the meaning of a closed construction: Don Juan's death does not establish sense and meaning as the governing telos of the piece. The promise of the play is, therefore, the promise of a scandal.

Felman returns to Austin's idea of "misfire" departing from the Donjuanian promise of constancy as the structuring metaphor, of not only Austin's work, but of the entire field of the philosophy of language. Moreover, Felman concludes that this repetition of failures constitutes both the possibility of enchainment of action within the play and the possibility of subversion - of the promise as well as of the authority of the (first) person who is making it. Moreover, *Don Juan* can be re-textualized through the same figure, as a text that is prone to "failure" in communicating unambiguously and transparently with its reader. So, according to Felman, this *donjuanism* of the Austinian meta-text consists in displacing the criterion of truth, or more precisely, in replacing it with the one of felicity; what he non-voluntarily succeeded in is actually providing scholarly (philosophical, linguistic) research with the status of performance, rather than with the status of statement:

> To say what he does *with* what he says; for it seems to me that the history of linguistic philosophy – the history of Austin's influence and of theoretical consolidation of his thinking about the performative – reflects an appropriation of the constative aspect of the theory, but hardly at all of its performative aspect. [...] the history of ideas has never inquired into what *Austin* was doing with what he was saying. (*The Scandal of the Speaking Body* 48-49)

> Dire ce qu'il fait *avec* ce qu'il dit : car il me semble que l'histoire de la philosophie linguistique – l'histoire de l'influence d'Austin et de la consécration théorique de sa pensée du performatif – n'a mis à contribution que l'aspect constatif de la théorie, et non son aspect performatif. [...] l'histoire des idées ne s'est pourtant jamais posé la question : que faisait *Austin* avec ce qu'l disait ? (*Le Scandale du corps parlant* 99-100)

Felman has applied the same concept – the one of repeating misfires – in her analysis of the reception of Austinian theory, strongly echoing Derridian notions of iterability and breaking with context, as well as psychoanalytical accounts of the unconscious. Therefore, she points out that a

misfire is not an exception but the rule inherent to any utterance. In other words, the entire "history of ideas" can be read as a chain of misunderstandings between different theories, and the interpretations of Austin's theory by Searle, Benveniste, and Derrida are to be thought of in the same terms. Thus, Felman posits Austin's general speech act theory as a story with an open ending, which was hence misinterpreted by the critics. Austin's work abounds in elements of incongruity, and is, hence, much closer to a literary than to a scholarly text, a dimension of his work which, according to Felman, has been symptomatically overlooked. As she argues, Austin, not unlike Don Juan and, ultimately, any other philosopher who allegedly deals with theoretical concepts, is promising the constative. For Felman, Don Juan's acts can be perceived as the embodiment of the theory of speech acts, whereas Austin's work actually reveals the *donjuanism* of theory.

In her book *Excitable Speech* (1997), Butler refers both to Austin and Felman. She mainly refers to Felman's book to stress a certain redoubling of language, thus distinguishing between what we do and the effect of that *doing*. Dealing with the question of the discursive formation of the subject, Butler describes a seemingly paradoxical mechanism: as subjects we are brought into being through linguistic (or discursive) norms, and it is precisely because this formation takes place in language, that we are constituted as (linguistically) vulnerable beings; language is what makes the subject's linguistic i.e. symbolic existence intelligible within a certain circuit of recognition. Namely, what Butler called the linguistic norm is a contingent, historically modelled constellation of different social practices, entirely dependent on repetition. Drawing intensely on Derrida's accounts of citationality and breaking with context, Butler uses the metaphor of *excitable speech* to point to the constitutive excess of the speech act in relation to its intention and the resulting possibility of political transformation. By virtue of being dependant on repetition, language (or the linguistic norm) is constantly open to resignification. Language is intrinsic to power, and vice versa, because the power of language is the power of the instrument through which it is exercised. According to Butler:

> [...] the speech act, as a rite of institution, is one whose contexts are never fully determined in advance, and that the possibility for the speech act to take on a non-ordinary meaning, to function in contexts where it has not belonged, is precisely the political promise of the performative, one that positions the performative at the centre of a politics of hegemony, one that offers an unanticipated political future for deconstructive thinking. (*Excitable Speech* 161)

Interestingly, Butler here uses the term promise in a significantly different way compared to her previous work: whereas in *Gender Trouble* the notion of promise was predominantly related to "the false promise of the ontological certitude" (*Gender Trouble* 27), in *Excitable Speech* Butler uses the term "promise" in order to address the open possibility of transformation, it is the promise "to produce the future of the language" (*Excitable Speech* 140). [2] Namely, tracing some lines of Austin's work in which the utterance was located within a "total speech situation", Butler stresses the possible reversal or the use of language in "cross-purposes" in situations in which language is intended to "wound". Setting the scene for these highly undesirable forms of speech, Butler enacts a "happy"

alternative of using the very same instrument (of speech) for resignification, emphasizing that this resifignication depends exactly on the existing "gap between the originating context or intention and the effects it produces" (*Excitable Speech* 14). Furthermore, Butler emphasizes: 'This is however not the dead-end for the agency, but the temporal dynamic and promise of its peculiar bind' (*Excitable Speech* 140); adding that "precisely the capacity of such terms to acquire non-ordinary meanings constitutes their continuing political promise" (*Excitable Speech* 145).

Despite the fact that Butler does not actively make reference to Felman's metaphor of the promise in *Excitable Speech*, Butler uses this expression to describe the possibility that results from the same structure. By revealing the (pre-given) subject as a grammatical fiction or seduction prior to entering the realm of the speakable, Butler underlines the possibility which results from the inevitable failure of the subject to fully conform with the terms of legitimacy. The question that this nexus of theoretical horizons (Austin, Felman, Butler) raises is how we can rethink the path from a misfire, i.e. an unfulfilled promise or a promise that is impossible to keep, towards the "political promise of the performative", the promise of the open future of language. In what way is the metaphorical speech of these authors indicative of a change that has emerged in terms of social or critical theory, and what are the main features of that change?

An attempt to reconstruct the notion of the subject in these three paradigms departing from the outlined fragments, allows us to see their mutual connections, as well as significant distinctions between them. Namely, in these shifts between analytical, psychoanalytical and poststructuralist paradigm, there is a noticeable switch from a sovereign subject that, in Austin's version, feels the solid theoretical ground slipping away, to what Butler names in *Excitable Speech* the "post-sovereign" subject (139). While Austin considers cases in which the agent's responsibility is questionable due to some contextual or circumstantial factors, Felman inaugurates the decentralized psychoanalytical subject, subjected to the failure in every attempt to communicate a meaning, which implies that any notion of agency is a structural impossibility. Finally, in the case of Butler's "post-sovereign" subject, the intentionality is on the one hand completely decentred, vanished from the subject, in a move similar to the one that Foucauldian theory makes in decentering the *power of the name* by staging in return the *name of power*, but at the same time this very turn is what makes the subject's agency possible. An important change of perspective enables the resignification of the notion of promise in these examples – from a false promise of metaphysical substantivity, which is inevitably subjected to failure – to a happy outcome of this failure (of the norm) to keep the promise as a promise of an open future of the subject's agency. So, how does the transformed grammar of the Butlerian performative resignify the gap between (to use Felman's terms) "doing" and a "thing that is done", or between statement and utterance? (*The Scandal of the Speaking Body* 49) ("la chose faite", *Le Scandale du corps parlant* 100)

If Butlerian promise is paradigmatic of this misappropriation "for other purposes", it is likely to assume that this misappropriation takes place, at least for one part, in her own work. One of the most convincing cases of a similar misappropriation, or, more generally, of resignification, which Butler

elaborates in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), is implied in the trajectory the term *queer* has travelled through the history of its usage. Initially being part of those linguistic and cultural practices that aimed to humiliate, to embarrass, to exclude, or to repress someone into the domain of the marginalized *other*, the term *queer* has eventually obtained a certain affirmative re-articulation within academic discourse. Nevertheless, whereas Butler focused in her earlier work on the possibilities of subversion and transgression, in her books published after 9/11 Butler insists on the condition of being precarious, *undone*, i.e. being *dispossessed* as the very basis of our social life. At the same time, one of her key concepts – the notion of agency – becomes *readable* through a slightly changed rhetoric: whereas "subversion", which is often (mis)understood by her readers as an open resistance to the discursive construction of gender and sexuality, figures even in the subtitle of *Gender Trouble*, in *Undoing Gender* (2004) "subversiveness" has been rearticulated in terms of an expansion of norms. Therefore, their opening up to more inclusive meanings enables us to perceive lives of others as precarious.

How can an analysis focused on the metaphorical nature of Butler's language help us understand this shift? The possibility that I would like to suggest in this article is to think of this change of focus in Butler's work from performativity to precariousness in terms of its long-term political promise. In order to understand the nature of Butler's engagement with theory, we should turn to one of the most convincing formulations related to queer theory/politics, which pertains precisely to its critical role. According to Butler, the future of the notion *queer* (but also the future of the theory named after it) should continue in future to enable this critical perspective on the discursive formation of the subject:

If the term "queer" is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes, and perhaps also yielded in favour of terms that do that political work more effectively. Such a yielding may well become necessary in order to accommodate – without domesticating – democratizing contestations that have and will redraw the contours of the movement in ways that can never be fully anticipated. (*Bodies that Matter* 228)

Thus, already in *Bodies that Matter* there are some formulations that give a hint of Butler's future theoretical (and political) engagement. What is more, Butler's performative act warns against the conservative appropriation of the very terms of struggle for sexual minority rights and its possible compliance with the neo-liberal regimes of power that tend to reproduce the lines of divide between the Western subject and its "archaic" non-Western other (Brown 2006). What is this Butlerian performative promising? Perhaps we could say that it announces new critical perspectives which would definitely divest themselves from the binary frameworks of identity/difference as the only possible tool in the struggle for social change. Furthermore, the idea of a coalitional subject that Butler sketches in *Frames of War* seems to converge in many points with notions of subjectivity that have since recently been elaborated within the vast body of neo-Marxist scholarship (Negri/Hardt 2001,

2006, Brown 1995). These newly emerging theoretical alliances can provide the present theoretical and political efforts with a different perspective on the possibilities of a definite shift from *difference* to *diversity* in its quest for the less violent/more inclusive forms of sociability. A related question would be concerned with a theory of the institutional power needed to "make" or "break promises" in the context of state-sponsored violence, potentially enabling a move beyond the exclusively binary/oppositional framing of current political struggles.

The possibilities of the subject's agency denoted in the metaphor of "the open future" are related to a whole scale of unanticipated effects. Butler's theory shows that the possibilities of the subject's agency, or, what is more, of its survival (taken symbolically or literally), result exactly from this condition of being *dispossessed*, which, far from being a definite, unhappy uptake of our social existence, opens up the unpredictable ways to some new, though always only provisional and partial *reappropriations* of the terms of legitimacy.

Conclusion

In line with the previous analysis, it might be concluded that Butler's criticism of the prevailing formative patterns of sex, gender and sexuality has acted as a powerful performative that has reshaped the whole field of gender studies. Moreover, having enabled the change that occurred not only in academy, but in popular culture and activism as well, the role of Butler's critical engagement itself strongly echoes Austinian notion of the performative speech act, in most compelling ways. Quite contrary to the usual criticisms concerning poststructuralist theories which consider these theories to be completely confined into the realm of language, of "logos", and, as such, self-sufficient and separated from the domain of a political action, I have departed from the idea that theory not only describes the existing symbolic order, but also potentially changes it. The gap between *doing a thing* and *having a thing done* in the case of Austin's elaboration of speech act theory, including Shoshana Felman's interpretation of this work, provides an indispensable terminological and epistemological tool for contemporary theories of subjectivity. The relevance of Austin's work on the performative speech acts in the late 20th century has shown that the span of intertextual relations is not only unpredictable but literally unlimited as well. These relations work by multiplying the horizons of mutual influences, so that the mentioned gaps remain permanently open to new inscriptions and interpretations.

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[1] Whereas there is a vast body of literature written on the topic of (literary) metaphor, one of the departing points for this article was Jacques Derrida's essay on metaphor in which he tends to blur the distinction between philosophy and rhetorics, claiming that they both rely on metaphoricity of language, while philosophy pretends to deal with concepts and ideas (Derrida 1972, see also De Man).

[2] "the normative promise of the humanist ideals premised on the metaphysics of substance" (*Excitable Speech* 27).The promise of ontological certitude implies that this promise is conceived as a false one, or impossible to keep, because these ontological truths are nothing but the effect of a discourse that tends to erase itself in the process of constructing that very truth.

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