

## CHAPTER ONE

### WHAT THE NOVEL DOES

#### *I. "oh, dear"*

Near the beginning of the second lecture in *Aspects of the Novel*, E. M. Forster recreates for his audience an imaginary scene of address: "What," he asks three fictional interlocutors, "does a novel do?"<sup>1</sup> Since he has already supplied the answer himself—"the fundamental aspect of the novel is its story-telling aspect"—the scene itself becomes an exercise in story-telling. Classically structured like a joke ("three guys walk into a bar . . ."), the scene exploits the iterative modality of the rhetorical question to tell us what we already know and, since we already know it, to set up a response that, in taking the question literally, might alter the meaning we assume it has. For Forster, the tone in which we voice our assent is what determines the significance of the question: the first speaker, the driver of a motor bus, is likeably vague; the second, a man playing golf, is aggressive and self-assured; the third (and here's the punch line) is Forster himself, who, "in a sort of drooping regretful voice," replies, "Yes—oh, dear, yes—the novel tells a story." By creating characters and situations to make a point that we would otherwise find so obvious as to obviate further comment, Forster is telling us something about what the novel does that its storytelling capacity alone cannot account for. The hesitation registered in the locution "oh, dear," at any rate, suggests that even Forster, who is here ventriloquizing himself as both character and author, cannot fully grasp what the novel does. The rhetorical question becomes an occasion for novelizing the story of the novel—the story that "it tells a story"—and to thus suggest in the language of fiction that there is in fact something more to the novel than telling stories; something that has to do with the manner in which the stories it tells are told; or something, perhaps, that escapes its own ability to tell stories.

When Forster posed this question in 1927 he could hardly have imagined that literary critics at the beginning of the twenty-first century would consider it as anything other than rhetorical. Yet, we tend to do just that,

assuming, perhaps too hastily, that the novel does do much more than tell a story. We now quite commonly hold that the novel participates in all sorts of social processes, helping to found the modern nation,<sup>2</sup> to consolidate overseas empires,<sup>3</sup> to advance industrial capitalism,<sup>4</sup> to enforce sexual difference,<sup>5</sup> and, more generally, to produce and police the subject.<sup>6</sup> These claims are far from baseless, and, when they have been presented in creative, nuanced, and exciting ways, they have reinvigorated the study of the novel and changed its disciplinary profile.<sup>7</sup> While I am persuaded that the novel does do more than “tell a story,” that it does in fact exercise cultural power, efforts to qualify this power (to what end? by which means?)—let alone to quantify it (how much? compared to what?)—remain unsatisfying and undertheorized insofar as they have tended to assume, rather than to show, that there is something specifically novelistic that can be made to account for the novel’s historicity.

Recent attempts to situate the realist novel within its thickly textured historical context find their critical bearing with reference to a constellation of terms formed around the notions of “matter,” “material,” “materialism,” and “materiality.” Whether one reads the appeal to the material as a way of grounding criticism in what is thereby deemed to be the aftermath of theory, or whether one finds its insistence on material practices a persuasive way of making literature matter at a time when it no longer seems to matter, the result is the same: the literariness of the literary tends to become immaterial to the study of the novel. This is not to say that categories such as “beauty,” “truth,” “genius,” or “emotion” ought to reenter our critical vocabularies (or at least not in an unexamined, uncritical fashion), but insofar as the reading practices that have found shelter under the rubric of “material culture studies” are historicist, the historicity of the literary should certainly be made to matter.

In part, this occlusion has to do with the disciplinary reconfiguration of the humanities as a field of interdisciplinary inquiry and with technological advances in information retrieval techniques and in archival accessibility that have made historical material readily available, but it also has to do with a resistance to engage the performativity of the novel from the perspective of its rhetorical complexity. Consider the two prevailing paradigms: history-of-the-book and object-studies. In the first instance, the novel is considered as an object in a world of objects. The historical impact of the novel, in this view, can be determined by tracing the specific modes of production, distribution, and consumption that transformed the nineteenth-century novel into one of the most important cultural com-

modities in Europe and the world over,<sup>8</sup> or, approaching the problem from the opposite direction, by reconstructing the different material practices whereby the novel circulated as a signifier of social distinction, acquiring symbolic capital, and attaining the status of a cultural object worthy of being consecrated, legitimated, and institutionalized.<sup>9</sup> Histories of reading practices that aim to situate the novel within the Victorian intellectual landscape, or *mentalité*, have expanded and complemented history-of-the-book studies by assigning value to the psychological,<sup>10</sup> physiological,<sup>11</sup> political,<sup>12</sup> and epistemological<sup>13</sup> dispositions of the novel, or what we might designate collectively, borrowing a term from sociology, as its “habitus.” But “reading” here designates an abstract capacity to engage the world through the medium of the book, seldom an engagement with the text itself.

The object-studies approach to materiality considers the novel not so much as an overdetermined object existing in the rich object-world of Victorian England but rather as a powerful medium of representation whose uncanny ability to accommodate broad generality and the particularity of detail within the same referential space allows one to gain privileged access to the material culture it inhabits. The realism of the novel is taken at face value, its object-strewn reality endowed with a signifying function that makes its representation a matter of transparency rather than an ideological “effect of the real” that would tend to falsify it. Whether it is a matter of the representation of objects as such,<sup>14</sup> or the sensory perceptions one may derive from them,<sup>15</sup> the historicity of the novel, in this view, rests on its ability to make life as lifelike as possible. The novel’s ability to influence, coerce, or otherwise discipline its readers, who are often portrayed as the always-already interpellated subjects of an ideology the novel can do no more than reinscribe as a narrative of subject construction, turns in this reading on the “obviousness” of its descriptions.<sup>16</sup> The objects found in the novel are meant to tell us exactly what they told the Victorians, as though the passage through the literary had merely embalmed their meaning without altering in the least their status as objects.

While many of these materialist studies are careful to avoid making causal connections between the novel as a discursive form and the cultural processes in which it is inscribed, they do not adequately address the problem of what historical impact, if any, the realist novel might have had beyond its own cultural formation. The materiality of the novel remains in many cases elusive. On the one hand, to study the novel-as-object is to bracket its defining characteristic as a literary work—its

literariness—even when it is often this very quality that, however understood, renders it an historically significant object in the first place. On the other, to limit the historical role of the novel to the effects it has on its readers is to subscribe uncritically to its referential transparency and to treat it as a linguistic construct that, no matter how elaborately wrought by figurative language, acts as a medium or conduit to the material culture that is said to exist outside of, and in spite of, its qualities as literature. I do not mean to suggest that these approaches to the study of the materiality of the novel are wrong or misguided. On the contrary: they have been extraordinarily productive, advancing our knowledge of the social conditions of possibility of the novel and inspiring rich readings of the massive representational ambitions of realism. But I do want to make the claim that this knowledge has been organized in such a way as to occlude or deemphasize the materiality of the very material of which the novel is made, namely, its language.<sup>17</sup>

To be sure, this state of affairs is in part the result of disciplinary realignments in the literary-critical field the most conspicuous practical effect of which has been the shift of emphasis from theoretical conceptualization and, to a lesser extent, formal description to historical or historicist recontextualization as the dominant model for literary interpretation. In the field of Victorian studies—itsself a construction of historicist periodization that, in contrast to, say, Romanticism or Modernism, bears no conceptual weight—this shift has been decisive, and, one could argue, programmatic insofar as its defining question—How did the Victorians represent themselves to themselves?—aspires to be a moral as well as a disciplinary imperative along the lines of the slogan Fredric Jameson once ventriloquized for (in the name of; so as to advance) dialectical thought: “Always historicize!”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the “materialism” that characterizes current research in the field is often used as another term for “history,” or, more precisely, historicism, insofar as it refers to something like “concrete reality” and privileges a world of objects belonging to a bygone age whose “life” must now be wrested from its inert existence in museum vaults, library archives, and the pages of novels.<sup>19</sup> Whereas one can quite justifiably trace the current use of the term “materialism” in literary criticism back to the Marxian concept of “historical materialism” (where its two terms, it is safe to say, hardly add to a pleonasm), it is also true that the ideological force of the concept has been attenuated by a sometimes uncritical attachment to the “thing” or “object” as though it alone were the key to all mythologies; it has been attenuated, that is, by confusing matter for event, or worse, product for mode of production.<sup>20</sup>

There would be no point in lamenting this particular loss, much less in attempting to recover some of the usefulness of theory to this problematic, if the question of literature's own materiality had not, as a result, receded into the background. Most literary critics working in the Victorian period would at present agree that cultural history is central to their interpretative task; few would claim that literature is not.<sup>21</sup> Yet, the current configuration of the field is such that the literariness of literature seems secondary, and in fact subservient, to its extraliterary aspects. With its unhealthy attachment to old-school concepts such as aesthetics, textuality, and ideology, not to mention rhetoric, critical interest in the literary seems quaintly "historical" (that is, outmoded) when not altogether irrelevant in the face of the concrete materiality of the object. The problem is not that the phrase "literary object" is understood in too literal a manner; it is that it is not taken quite literally enough. The literary is sublimated out of the solid matter of culture even as the logic of argumentation and the research protocols of materialist critics have been enabled by (and owe their institutional legitimacy to) the questions (of race, of class, of sex, of gender, of politics, more generally) posed by cultural studies to literature in the first place. However thick the cultural description afforded by materialist critics, such occlusion prevents us from adequately addressing a key *historical* question about the literary object: what does literature, as literature, do?

In what follows, I aim to show that this question can be more productively addressed by attending to the materiality of the literary; a materiality that, as we shall see in greater detail below, is of the order of linguistic events. Before engaging the substance of this claim, however, we must first examine one of the symptoms whose critical vicissitudes make visible the extent to which materialist critics already depend on the materiality of the literary for a practice of reading that would deny it.

## 2. *The Novel of the Novel*

As Forster formulates it, the question of novel's agency—"What does a novel do?"—can be said to stage a further fiction: the novelization of the novel. The question assumes that there is an entity called a *novel* that is in fact capable of doing things; but it also assumes that, without knowing this, Forster (or anyone else, for that matter) could not have formulated this particular question in the first place, regardless of whether we read it as a rhetorical question (that is, as a question to which we need not re-

spond since the answer is irrelevant insofar as we already know that the novel tells as a story) or we read it literally and proceed to look for answers that would, insofar as they respond to the question, legitimate it as a question worth asking. If it is indeed worth asking, it is worth asking not because we expect to account for the things we do *to* novels (like marking or defacing them or, at a nonreferential level, even reading them) or *in* novels (presuming some of us actually appear in them), nor because we aim to specify the instrumentality of the novel, as though it were in fact used to do certain things or there were certain things we did *with* it (like “communicating” or, more prosaically, stopping doors or kindling fires). It is worth asking, if it is indeed worth asking, because it is assumed that the novel is actually capable of doing something by itself and on its own. For Forster this something is storytelling and, to show just how capable it is of telling stories, he creates a scene of storytelling in which three imaginary speakers agree that it tells a story. But that Forster was able to create a novelistic scene structured around a rhetorical question by assuming that we all know that the novel tells a story, does not imply that taking it literally would eliminate the need to tell stories about the novel’s ability to do things. In either case, we are already made to assume, by the way in which the question is formulated, that the novel has some form of agency. Authoritarian regimes and bourgeois moral crusaders burn books or censor them because they take for granted that literature exercises some form of agency, or at least because there is a consensus that it does, which is why it must therefore be suppressed. It is not surprising, then, that in our accounts of the novel’s cultural role, the novel becomes a fully fledged (indeed, a fully fleshed) character who either becomes the agent of its own institutionalization, following something like a Foucauldian principle of subjectification or *assujettissement* in which it incorporates, quite literally, its social role, or who in acting *as* an agent (of imperialism, of nationalism, of capitalism, of sexism, of racism, of individualism) comes to stand for agency as such.

The point to be made is not that the personification of the novel, like that of so many of the objects that clutter our object-life, corresponds to some quaint nostalgic attachment to selfhood in the face of the generalized reification of existence for which personification then becomes a figure, nor yet that prosopopoeia is to some inevitable degree the price we pay for doing business with language. What should be noted is that the attribution of agency to the novel marks a conceptual blind spot in novel criticism: we grasp intuitively that the novel acts in the world, but we can

only articulate its historicity by figuring the novel as though it were in possession of the faculties of a subject that was present to itself. The confusion of literary for literal effects is perhaps unavoidable, but in the case of novel criticism it becomes particularly acute, leading to imprecise descriptions and broad generalizations about the functioning of literature and the role it plays in cultural constructions. We confidently talk about the “voice” of the novel, or of its “psychology,” or even of its “history” without repairing on the fact that, in conferring sentience to the novel, we are in fact doing what we now claim the novel cannot do: namely, naturalizing a trope; in this case, the trope of catachresis. Like the legs of a table or the face of a mountain, the novel’s human attributes are in fact figures with no adequate referent in reality. Convenient though it may be to think of the novel in terms of a subject, such familiarity goes against some of the very claims we make about the novel’s role in producing subjects and, more important, the claims we make about the subject that is so produced.<sup>22</sup>

The novel has indeed played a critical role in the movement toward the so-called decentering of the subject to which theory has been explicitly devoted for the better part of the last three decades, providing a grid of intelligibility for abstract models of subject formation that often operate at a considerable remove from the social mechanisms they describe. The traditional novel, as opposed to, say, the lyric or academic painting, is ideally suited to provide such a grid because in undertaking to represent reality faithfully it very often does so by tracking the fate of individuals in society. Indeed, this process forms the thematic core of the novel, a narrative of becoming-subject that reaches its fullest generic expression in what is perhaps the most emblematic form of the nineteenth century, the *Bildungsroman*, which typically chronicles in the key of disillusion the manner in which characters slowly accrue all the attributes of social identity as they make their way in the world.<sup>23</sup> But novel criticism has of late also staged a “decentering” of its own in which the subject, most prominently though not exclusively through the figure of the author, has tended to recede into the background.<sup>24</sup> The story is familiar: First, as the interpretation of the text for its own sake takes center stage in the New Critical practice of close reading, the figure of the author begins to drift away from the focus of criticism, and the question of intention (what did the author mean?) gets transposed to the functioning of language (how does a text generate meaning?). Second, the notion of language-as-structure undergoes a radical displacement as the founding distinctions that secure pres-

ence (presence in general, but formalizable as the self-presence of the figure of the author) are found to be unstable (speech vs. writing; figurative vs. nonfigurative language; constative vs. performative), and the possibility that we could ever exercise complete control over language, much less intend its meaning, proves to be illusory. Third, in a related but divergent trend, as insights into the functioning of language enter the social arena, theoretical models that explain how subjects are formed begin to be elaborated whose emphasis on the sociolinguistic mechanisms in or by means of which the subject is produced further erode any certainty we may still have harbored concerning the self-present agency of the subject. This last moment, coinciding with the institutionalization of high theory in the academic curriculum, then becomes the focus (if not exactly the punch line) of novel studies, with the result that, as the mechanisms of subject formation proposed by Foucault, Althusser, Lacan, Barthes, and others begin to be applied or integrated into formalist, historicist, or psychoanalytic readings of the novel, the novel, as a thoroughly socialized discursive vehicle that not only reflects but also helps shape the society it inhabits, comes to be seen as a more or less complicitous participant in the very processes of subject constitution it describes. Whether the subject installed in and by the novel coincides with the “liberal,” “bourgeois,” or “sovereign” subject of ideology, or whether it is in fact much less stable, authoritative, and freely willing than the novel would have us believe, becomes a matter of debate, but the novel’s participation in the process does not. D. A. Miller’s diagnosis of the critical consensus of the late 1980s is to the point: “It is now widely held that 1) the novel is engaged in a project to produce a stable, centered subject in a stable, centered world; and that 2) this project is inevitably doomed to failure” (xi). The project is doomed to failure not because the novel does not actually produce a subject; it is doomed to failure because it does not produce a stable subject. The subject produced is, like the novel form itself, elastic, fungible, and susceptible to discipline. What is peculiar about this story is not that the novel participates in the social construction of a subject that is thereby seen to be less than fully in control of its acts; rather, what is peculiar about it is that, whatever else this model accomplishes, it also transfers to the novel the sort of agency that it has already made the subject abdicate.

We are left with a linguistic entity whose attributes begin to resemble the very subject it was meant to have produced, as though in a moment of sudden literality it became the protagonist of its own representational fiction (namely, that it brings characters to life) and produced itself as sub-



ject; we are left, that is, with a thoroughly novelized version of the novel. This strange introjection in reverse (or rather retrojection, following the replicating logic of a retrovirus rather than the economic paradigm of psychic incorporation whereby the lost mourned “author,” say, is replaced by the novelized subject of the novel or, rather, the novel-as-novelized-subject) accounts in part for why the novel’s historicity has been misconstrued in critical practice. For critical accounts that attempt to specify the ability of literature to act in the world invariably confront the difficulty of defining just what this “act” actually entails.

Sociological models of literary history, for instance, tend to describe the historical efficacy of the novel in terms of its production, circulation, institutionalization, and reception; in short, its marketability. Franco Moretti’s quantitative approach to the history of the novel, to mention the single most influential sociological model of the last decade, gives us a remarkable picture of the novel’s reach in the nineteenth century and shows us how this pattern of distribution affected, and was itself affected by, the formal characteristics of the novel. The novel is figured as something of an organism that adapts to a Darwinian literary market in which genres are economically selected according to advantageous morphological traits. It must be said that Moretti’s deft deployment of different abstract models—maps, trees, graphs—to explain the historical evolution of novelistic genres is entirely persuasive, but it falls short of addressing the question that seemingly motivates it.<sup>25</sup> The agency of the novel, if it has any, occurs after the fact of its dissemination; it is, in any case, not coterminous with it. We know that the novel can “do” many things, from telling stories to building nations to producing subjects, but the mechanisms sociology brings to bear to account for its cultural agency have little to do with the source of that agency insofar as it can do what it does only by virtue of its being literary, no matter how widely distributed.

For even when sociology addresses the question of agency explicitly, as in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, it is to an extraliterary form of symbolic agency that it refers insofar as literature, like “art” or “culture” more generally, is said to act as a placeholder for social distinction and prestige. In Bourdieu’s conceptualization of the field of literary production, the agency of the author is limited to an act of “position-taking” between the structuring axes of commerce and disinterest, while the agency of literature becomes transposed to the “consecrating” agencies (publishers, translators, editors, reviewers, academics, etc.) who legitimate the work.<sup>26</sup> Bourdieu’s formulation of “cultural” or “symbolic” capital can usefully

inform the description of the novel's social significance, but we must also remember that this significance is a function of a discursive regime that operates aside from, and often in spite of, the novel's literariness.<sup>27</sup> In this context, the novel's literary attributes are necessary but insufficient: its literariness seems to be only incidental to its role as social broker; it does not even have to be read to operate as cultural capital. Consumption, in this scheme, is only the last stage of a complex social transaction that occurs among people: so conceived, the literary field is a sociological problem, not a literary one.

And with respect to cultural critics who do attempt to account for the literariness of the novel when describing its social role, it is not clear why most of the models they employ assume that the novel's acts are performed, if they are performed at all, at the level of representation. Ignoring for the moment the ambiguity to which the term "representation" lends itself, we can say at some level of generality that it follows a logic of substitution. Whether this is an instance of reference or referral between a putative world "out there" and the language with which we gain access to it, or whether there are just too many "out there's" to determine where one ends and the "other" of language begins, the operational fiction of the novel is that it controls this ferrying of re-ference by marking off the limits of its discourse (most often, as we shall see, by finding closure in marriage or in death). The realist novel is at any rate premised on the assumption of mimetic correspondence between a world of fiction and an actual world about which it can otherwise make few empirical claims given its fictional predisposition. This is not to deny that literary representations have historical impact; if anything, they have too much. But to assume that because they do, the medium of representation must itself be transparent, is to succumb uncritically to the seductive fiction of their efficacy; it would be like having Emma Bovary playing Don Quijote's Dulcinea.

Indeed, it is most often the logic of substitution that is made to account for readerly identification, which, broadly construed, is one of the principal psychological mechanisms adduced to provide the justification needed for arguing that the novel participates in social processes of subject formation. In its Foucauldian modality, to name the single most influential model in novel studies, the novel "represents" a model of discipline insofar as it trains its readers into becoming the principle of their own subjectification not only by providing narrative blueprints, as though the novel were a conduct manual and its readers docile bodies eager to be trained, but also by creating conditions of visibility that alert us to a

regime of self-discipline we must happily embrace lest we cease to be seen at all and thereby disown or be deprived of all claims to subjectivity.<sup>28</sup> To be sure, there is a psychological mechanism at work insofar as discipline is “internalized,” but it is hard to tell exactly what sort of relay function the novel fulfills if in order to read it, to “identify” with it, to “get” it, one would presumably have to have been already regulated to its self-pleasuring technologies. Arguments similarly disposed to the logic of substitution could be enumerated, some of which might follow a particular psychic pathway (metonymic condensation or metaphoric displacement), while others might choose the dizzying reversals of negative dialectics, but in almost every case the logic followed would most likely be based on a substitutive protocol of mimetic verbal representation.

Representations, from this perspective, seem to contribute more to the novelization of the novel than to the historicity of the novel as discursive practice. However one construes the agency of representations, the novel’s fictionality circulates as fiction and thus belongs to a second degree of history making. This is the case because the agency we attribute to representations is always mediated by the act of reading and the various protocols of interpretation, decoding, and identification that reading is commonly said to stage. In this view, the act of reading puts into play ideological, symbolic, or psychological mechanisms equivalent to, or sufficiently similar to, those said to be put into motion by the state, its various institutions, or the psychic drives. But even when these mechanisms are thought to operate in the “real” world by means of language (consider, for instance, Lacan’s insistence on the linguistic pathways of symptoms and of desire; the verbal and verbalized forms of Althusserian interpellation; the discursive regimes within which the power-knowledge doublet is articulated in Foucault), in the study of the novel they appear to work by means of formal analogy (Moretti), “cognitive mapping” (Jameson), or other “symbolic” means whose linguistic nature is ignored or taken for granted, as though analogies and allegories were themselves figures of and indeed for referential transparency. The novelization of the novel thus leaves a crucial question unanswered. If the novel does in fact do more than tell a story—it produces a subject, say, or creates the nation-state—by what means does it do what it does?

The principal contention of this book is that the nonrepresentational, nonfigurative, nonreferential dimension of novelistic discourse is at least just as determinant a factor of the novel’s eventness as its representational, mimetic, figurative dimension. To put it in the terms I shall be em-

ploying to advance my argument, it is the performative force of language, not just its constative uses, to which we must attend if we wish to understand the historicity of the novel. The materiality of the literary must pass through its performativity.

### 3. *The Performativity of the Novel*

In “ordinary language” situations, it would not be terribly controversial to assert that the historicity of a particular discourse ought to be analyzed from the perspective of its performativity.<sup>29</sup> After J. L. Austin, it is universally acknowledged that our ability to do things with language is centered on performative speech. To suggest from this perspective that the novel’s ability to do things with its words must have something to do with the performative force of language seems to make a lot of practical sense. And, indeed, when we consider the sorts of stories the novel best and most often tells (“Yes—oh, dear, yes—the novel tells a story”) we immediately notice that many of the actions carried out in a novel involve events that are regulated by performative speech acts of the type Austin isolated in *How to Do Things with Words*: promising, confessing, apologizing, proposing, ordering, betting, naming, judging, and so on.<sup>30</sup> J. Hillis Miller isolates four different types of performative speech acts in the realist novel: (1) in the positing of the story by the author; (2) in the testimony of the imagined narrator; (3) in the lives of the characters within the story; (4) in the response of the reader to the text.<sup>31</sup> Performative language, in short, seems to be an intrinsic discursive element of the novel.

Consider the two determinant plot patterns in the traditional novel: marriage and inheritance. In Austin’s account, “I do” and “I bequeath” are pure and explicit performatives that, given the right circumstances, will do what they say upon their being uttered. The “total speech situation”—the conditions that must be met for a performative speech act to “secure uptake”—includes not only the sincerity of the participants, the conventional character of the nomenclature, the authenticity of a signature, and so on, but also a ritualistic or institutional *mise-en-scène* within which a performative speech act is actually uttered and over which the one uttering the performative has little or no authority. One can describe the marriage plot as the gradual narrative assemblage of the “total speech situation” within which the performative “I do” is able to “secure uptake”: marriage can come about only if the circumstances are appropriate, the participants sincere, and the nomenclature conventional. In Jane

Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, the plot is premised on the ability of each of the five Bennet sisters to assemble all the conditions necessary to marry one of the four young men who enter the neighborhood, only two of whom are "of good fortune." Elizabeth, who at different points is paired with three of them, is finally able to secure Darcy's "I do," but only after having once before refused Darcy and rejected Mr. Collins out of hand. Jane and Bingley, though evidently destined to marry each other from the moment they meet, must first overcome a number of obstacles placed by others in the path of their union before they are able to say "I do." Lydia, in contrast, has no trouble convincing Wickham to elope with her, but her precipitous "I do," we fear, will never amount to a happy ending. Kitty has lost out to Lydia but has a whole regiment to hand, and Mary is too bookish, too literal before the *éclat* of a proverb, to be able to enter the narrative economy of marriage. The marriage plot in Austen is mobilized by the performative force of the eventual speech act to which narrative desire always aspires.

Similarly, the inheritance plot suspends the performative force of a will or testament until the coincidence of the appropriate circumstances, the authenticity of a signature, and the application of a conventional legal formula permit money, titles, and property to change hands. The plot in Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, for instance, hinges on the discovery of two wills. The discovery of the first will sets into motion the before-and-after dynamic that accounts for the circularity (or circumlocution) of the narrative as a whole. About halfway through the novel, Arthur Clennam and Pancks find out that William Dorrit is the lost heir to a large fortune that allows him to pay off his debts and leave the Marshalsea after many years of imprisonment. The second will is produced near the end of the narrative, revealing the secret of Arthur's birth and making Little Dorrit the beneficiary of a long suppressed inheritance Arthur's great uncle has left her in remorse for his treatment of Arthur's real mother, a singer befriended by Little Dorrit's uncle Fredrick. In Dickens's novel, plot invests the speech act with all the force of a desire whose fulfillment becomes the engine of narrative development.

Yet, when we try to extrapolate this narrative principle to the novel's eventness, two problems immediately become apparent: (1) performative speech acts uttered in a novel are "parasitic." According to Austin, words *do* something in or by the saying of something only when and if they are used "seriously" in "ordinary" language situations. Performative utterances, in Austin's often cited words, are "*in a peculiar way hollow* or void if

said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy" (22; emphasis in original). Austin's distinction between "serious" and "parasitic" uses of language seems to preclude the operation of performative speech acts in the novel's linguistic field of action. Conceivably, performative speech acts could be cited in the present tense of dialogue or be described as actions having taken place at some point in the past proper to the time of their utterance, but they would remain nothing short of unspeakable as acts within the discursive compass of the novel. And even if performative utterances were to be used "seriously" in fiction—as seriously as the traditional novel takes them—they would already be re-absorbed into the world of fiction by virtue of what Austin calls their propensity to "masquerade" as statements of fact, descriptive or constative. By implication, performative speech acts could presumably operate in the novel provided they "masqueraded" as the "parasites" they always already were. In this view, when a character in a novel says "I do" we are witnessing the representation of an act of speech but not its performance, since, quite obviously, a marriage has not in fact taken place when Elizabeth and Darcy say "I do" since it only occurs in fiction. Leaving aside for the moment the possible effects the representation of speech acts may have upon the reader (instruction, elation, disappointment, anxiety, what have you),<sup>32</sup> we can say that, since these acts are fictional, they are not performative at all and the novel does not in fact "do" anything in or by them.

But even if we were to pretend for a moment that these acts, as acts, contribute in some as yet indeterminate way to the historicity of the novel, another problem would immediately arise: (2) The speech acts we encounter in the novel are very often *structurally* infelicitous. In Austin's typology, performative speech acts are said to be "unhappy" if at least one of the conditions appropriate for their execution is not met. Aside from the different kinds of "ills" which "infect" all utterances, performative speech acts are liable to be unhappy under "extenuating circumstances": the participants may be acting under duress, or there may otherwise exist "factors reducing or abrogating the agent's responsibility." The plots to which performatives give narrative significance such as marriage and inheritance are very often assembled as a function of the infelicity of the acts that constitute them. The ending in *Pride and Prejudice* is enormously satisfying, but the satisfaction we derive from it has nothing to do with the happiness we feel for Darcy and Elizabeth. Like remembering the name of a town we have long forgotten, the ending of Austen's novel comes as a

relief: how many times has Elizabeth tried but failed to say “I do”? “I do” brings the narrative to a close, but it does so only insofar as there is nothing else to plot after it has been uttered. Charlotte Lucas has nothing of narrative interest to do after she marries Mr. Collins. Similarly, to the extent that the two wills in *Little Dorrit* are at the heart of the enigmas its protagonists persist in solving, the infelicity of the speech acts that constitute them become, in their inactivity or quiescence, the engine of narrative development. Pancks’s mechanical approach to his investigations is the counterpart to a discursive apparatus, the Circumlocution Office, whose disposition to action is captured in the phrase “How not to do it.” The narrative possibilities of “How not to do it,” as the Barnacles know only too well, are endless as their ever increasing number suggests, but the fact that the slogan is also the almost exact negative of the title to Austin’s lectures, *How to Do Things with Words*, confirms that narrative excess depends on performative infelicity. “Circumlocution” is the name the novel gives to this narrative principle.

To do things with words efficiently is also to have nothing else to say. The “how to do it” spirit of bourgeois enterprise is boring from the point of view of narrative development. Reversals, coincidences, misunderstandings, obstacles, enigmas, and so on, are the novel’s natural building blocks, but they generate drama, incident, suspense only to the degree that they are also contingencies that make it difficult for speech acts to “secure uptake.” The state of suspension in which narrative maintains marriage and inheritance as a condition of its own narrative momentum is also a state of performative quiescence in which language cannot act. Picture in this context Miss Havisham, the eternal bride; time stopped, as she walks in circles with Pip at her arm. And Pip absolutely misreads her: he does not realize that she could never have been his benefactress since she cannot act, still waiting for an “I do” that will never materialize. Paradoxically, this state of affairs gives rise to a seemingly endless proliferation of narrative action, which stops only when language actually acts; when “how to do it” puts an end to dalliance at a single blow. Marriage and inheritance might well be the dominant forms of this novelistic paradox, but they are not the only ones: all sorts of events brought off by performative speech acts are processed in realist narratives in a similarly infelicitous fashion. Or, to paraphrase Tolstoy, all happy performatives are alike but an unhappy performative is unhappy after its own fashion.

Which brings us to the narrative paradox at the heart of this study: No sooner do we notice that the realist novel expends considerable narra-

tive energy detailing the circumstances surrounding events governed by performative speech acts than we realize that, no matter how consuming the narrative's desire for their consummation, such events become narratable only to the degree that they fail to occur in ways appropriate to their conventional performance. Though the performative force of language clearly matters to the traditional novel, its explicit acts seem immaterial to its functioning.

So staged, the narrative paradox of infelicity may well account for the fact that the performativity of the novel has not been taken very seriously. But it also raises a serious practical question: How are we to isolate the performative in a medium that resists its performance? If our claim that the performativity of the novel paves the road toward a fuller understanding of its historicity is to hold water, then surely we must be able to describe the performative operations of language in the novel and produce empirical evidence to corroborate this description. But we seem to be left with a ghostly force of language whose operation in the novel is far from self-evident. This raises the added difficulty of stating what precisely the object of study should be. The difficulty stems in part from the conceptual equivocation that has haunted the theory of speech acts from its inception.<sup>33</sup> On the one hand, "performative" can refer to a particular speech act uttered in the course of a socially significant event in accordance with a series of conventional protocols upheld by cultural consensus. On the other, "performative" can refer to the inaugural act of positing that conditions the possibility of language itself.<sup>34</sup> But the conceptual equivocation cannot be eliminated by terminological clarity alone, for both meanings of "performative" have a reciprocal need for each other. No concept of the social operation of performative speech acts can have the linguistic force of positing separated from its function as act. Conversely, the positing power of language, as soon as one reflects upon it as an operation intrinsic to all language use, can only be grasped *as* language in its hypostatized state as a pure performative formula of the type isolated by Austin ("I do," "I bequeath," "I promise," and so on). The difficulty in isolating the performative force of language in the novel thus reflects the resistance of the performative itself to the act of defining. What sort of statements can be made about a type of utterance whose philosophical relevance stems from the fact that it is *not* a statement, descriptive or constative, to which true/false criteria can be applied?

Matters are not made any easier by the fact that the study of performativity in the novel has been met with critical resistance. While Speech



Act Theory has mobilized a number of celebrated readings in drama, autobiography, and poetry (Shoshana Felman's reading of Molière's *Don Juan*, Stanley Fish's reading of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, Paul de Man's reading of Rousseau's *Confessions*, Jacques Derrida's reading of the poetry of Francis Ponge, Barbara Johnson's reading of Mallarmé's *La Déclaration foraine*),<sup>35</sup> the performative force of language, with the notable exception of J. Hillis Miller's reading of the novels of Henry James, has not been consistently investigated in connection with such a convention-bound form as the novel.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Austin himself excludes the novel from among the genres he explicitly mentions as possible hosts for the "parasitic" uses of performative language. Poetry, drama, and "soliloquy," the genres Austin more than once dismisses from the purview of his investigations, are the very genres that have received critical attention (if for "soliloquy" we substitute autobiography).<sup>37</sup> It would appear that the critical resistance to the study of performativity in the novel might also signify a critical indisposition to read against resistance, as though the novel's generic disposition toward "ordinary" language rendered the critique of Austin's distinction between the "parasitic" and the "serious" uses of language inoperative with the host and its parasite living in happy novelistic symbiosis. Yet, if one assumes that Austin's exclusion of the novel from the excluded genres signals an ambivalence about the discursive status of the novel, the study of the performative force of its language becomes of critical interest precisely because the novel purports to be both literal and literary at the same time.

Beyond these lines of resistance, then, there appears to be a resistance to the performative force of language inherent in the form of the novel that encumbers the approach to its isolation with further difficulties. These difficulties arise from the claims of reference commonly made about language and extend to the internal articulations of the novel's discursive components as well as the articulation of the field of language inhabited by the novel. From the perspective of referentiality, two possible approaches to the reading of the performative aspects of the Victorian novel suggest themselves. One would seek to show the ways in which the novel's serious attempt to capture the reality of speech acts as everyday occurrences is articulated; the other would show how this attempt is undermined. For the purposes of the present argument, these two approaches can be conveniently aligned with two moments of contemporary literary criticism, New Historicism and Deconstruction, respectively. For New Historicism, cultural acts or artifacts are conceived of as repre-

sentational modes or practices that are ideologically significant. By appealing to a historically conceptualized “poetics of culture,” New Historicism attempts to decode the discursive practices at work in the production, dissemination, and reception of these cultural artifacts. In the words of Stephen Greenblatt, “the work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society.”<sup>38</sup> In this context, a historical account of performative language use in Victorian England would serve as a contextual matrix within which to situate the novel’s representation of the social mechanisms of subjectification, say, or, on a more complex level, the instrumentality of the performative in bringing about the discursive construction of reality. The operation of performative speech acts would then be subsumed under the category of culture, and a metaphysics of exchange, circulation, and negotiation would be deployed to account for the ultimately unproblematic, if complex, traffic between language and society. Accordingly, the performative force of language would be conceived of as having been rendered constative by the referential pressure brought to bear upon its operations by the novel’s mimetic protocols, no matter how intricately mediated their deviation from the *vraisemblable*.<sup>39</sup> In this “literal” reading of the novel, language functions against a cultural backdrop of representations and remains, in however complex a form, within the horizon of referentiality. This reading would not, in any case, be able to address fully the narrative paradox of performative infelicity since, in its efforts to historicize language use, only acts that have been happily performed would count as historical.

In the second instance, the account of the novel’s representation of everyday language use would be shown to be illusory given the perennial predicament peculiar to literary language: no matter how insistently the novel refers to an “outside” world, it is deprived of referential meaning and cannot refer reliably to anything other than its own language. In the words of Paul de Man, “Literature is a fiction not because it somehow refuses to acknowledge ‘reality,’ but because it is not *a priori* certain that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are *like* those, of the phenomenal world. It is therefore not *a priori* certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language.”<sup>40</sup> In this “literary” reading, the constative structures of reference in the novel would be considered as an unreliable source of information about extralinguistic reality; transparency is an illusion produced, but not

sustained, by literary language. We can give the illusion of literary referentiality the name of ideology,<sup>41</sup> but its critique alone would not bring us closer to isolating the performative force of language in the novel.

This results in a seeming paradox: the first reading protocol promotes a “literary” reading of ordinary language, while the second insists on a “literal” reading of literary language (though here “literal,” like the word “history,” operates as catachresis; that is, it has no adequate referent in reality). In either case, performative speech acts, because they constitute in their operational modality the nonreferential pole of language, would themselves resist cultural representation and rhetorical figuration.<sup>42</sup> Although representations as well as tropes can have a performative function, performative speech acts themselves cannot be said to be either tropes or representations. Strictly speaking, performative forces are unreadable: to read an avowedly referential medium from the perspective of its nonreferentiality is therefore to read the novel against its readability.<sup>43</sup> Like scientific experiments involving physical forces, the isolation of the performative force of language in the novel must therefore proceed along oblique means; that is, through an account of its *effects*. From among the protocols of a performative reading of the novel, then, referentiality will not disappear: the effects of the performative force of language in the novel are distributed along a number of representational and rhetorical axes whose referentiality is at once articulated and undermined by *reference* to performative speech acts. In this context, both a “literal” and a “literary” reading of the traces left upon the novel by the performative force of language are required in order to measure its effects.

The notion of a performative “effect,” however, is somewhat misleading. Performative speech acts cannot be thought of as belonging to a chain of causality linking words with deeds: words *are* deeds. In a manner that is more acute though equally applicable for the conception of the performative as the positing force of language than for that of the performative as a socially sanctioned rite of individuation, it can be said that words act without words. Words certainly accomplish things, but words that act are themselves the material sedimentation of the performative force they exert. In their social context, such words are conventional insofar as they become repeatable through a historically determined repertoire of what Austin calls “total speech situations,” which, along with convened-upon verbal formulas that may or may not be needed, often involve institutionally authorized protocols. But there is no reason intrinsic to language that “I do” be used to consecrate a marriage or that “I bet” be used “seriously”

in every instance. This is not simply a matter of philological curiosity. As Jacques Derrida has repeatedly argued, the performative force of language is a condition of possibility of language itself. He uses the verb *entamer* to designate the ways in which the iterability of “words” (he calls them “graphematic marks”) depends upon the performative force of language to both breach and broach the contexts of their utterance.<sup>44</sup> Far from causing effects, then, this cutting or wounding force conditions the possibility that words be used at all *as* words, whether written or spoken, in shifting and varying contexts. That the material traces of the performative in the novel appear *as* effects is a function of the “historical” and rhetorical sedimentation of its force, which can never be fully absorbed by either representational or figural structures of reference. Indeed, for reasons which will become clear in our discussion of novelistic irony below, it is precisely at the moment that the “literary” and “literal” registers of the novel interrupt each other that the materiality of language makes itself most evident as a force of rupture.

#### 4. *Irony and the Novel*

It is in this context that a set of commonly acknowledged though rarely pursued insights offered by Georg Lukács about the characteristic “dissonance” of the form of the novel may be profitably reexamined. In *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács famously defines the novel as “the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God.”<sup>45</sup> For Lukács, the novel finds its form in the attempt to reconcile the aspiration to organic totality found in the epic with an estranged contemporary reality that makes such totality impossible. The novel is not a closed and established form with repeatable conventions like the epic; rather, it is an “ironic” form that is continuously refashioned: “the novel, in contrast to other genres whose existence resides within the finished form, appears as something in the process of becoming” (72–73). This process privileges a thematics of the search, of an “adventure of interiority,” and an outward form that resembles biography. Unlike the hero of the epic, however, the novel’s protagonist, whose “psychology is the field of action of the demonic,” never finds reconciliation in an empty world. The thematic duality of a contingent world and a “problematic individual,” and the resulting structural fusion of the “homogeneously organic and stable” and the “heterogeneously contingent and discrete,” produce discontinuities in the form of the novel. It is to this dissonant character of the novel form that Lukács, citing “the first theo-

reticians of the novel, the aesthetic philosophers of early Romanticism," gives the name of irony. More than an aesthetic solution to the representational problematics posed by the bourgeoisie's divided consciousness, irony becomes the only means by which such chasm can find expression: "Irony, with intuitive double vision, can see where God is to be found in a world abandoned by God" (92). Since irony undermines the possibility of transparent referentiality, the novel cannot be said to "imitate reality," but rather to mediate between the experience of a given reality and the purely abstract understanding of such an experience. The novel aspires to organic totality yet only achieves a "conceptual" totality that is "abolished again and again." Such patterns of ironic dissonance reflect a fundamental state of crisis in the discursive status of the novel.

The relation obtaining between irony and the novel is to be sure something of a commonplace among literary historians, but for Lukács it does more than account for the stylistic or tonal characteristics of certain novels. It corresponds to an equivalence: the novel is intrinsically ironic. This seems somewhat surprising given the instantaneous character of irony and the sequential beginning-middle-and-end structure of narrative. Indeed, Lukács himself accords the category of time the priority of establishing organic continuity to the novel form as though it were the narrative treatment of sequential temporality that were alone able to overcome the discontinuity inherent in ironic self-reflexiveness. Yet, as Paul de Man notes in his essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality," irony and allegory are both determined by a "temporal predicament" negatively experienced by a divided self caught between lived moments (captured in the mode of the present proper to irony) and the idealized succession of time (captured in the sequential mode of either the past or the future proper to allegory). The novel, in this view, has the "truly perverse assignment of using both the narrative duration of the diachronic allegory and the instantaneity of the narrative present."<sup>46</sup>

In "The Rhetoric of Temporality" de Man refers to irony as an act, but it is conceived of as a trope whose figural operations partake in a "dialectic of the self." In the later essay "The Concept of Irony," de Man no longer takes for granted that irony operates solely in a rhetorical (tropological) mode, and explicitly develops the performative aspects of irony: "Irony also very clearly has a performative function. Irony consoles and it promises and it excuses. It allows us to perform all kinds of performative linguistic functions which seem to fall out of the tropological field, but also to be very closely connected with it."<sup>47</sup> As he rehearses the itinerary

charted by the Jena Romantics—the same “theoreticians of the novel” to whom Lukács refers in his own theory of the novel—de Man focuses on Schlegel’s use of Fichte’s dialectic. For Fichte, according to de Man, the self is a logical category that is “essentially and inherently linguistic.” Language posits the self as catachresis; that is, as an entity without an adequate referent in reality. But because the self is posited by language, it can also posit its opposite. “About this self, which is thus posited and negated at the same time, nothing can be said. It’s a purely empty, positional act, and no acts of judgment can be made about it, no statements of judgment of any kind can be made about it” (173). The “I” and the “not-I,” however, bear something like a relation to each other that delimits and defines them. The parts thus isolated become the properties of the self, and acts of judgment can begin to be emitted as the properties of the “I” and the “not-I” are compared. De Man understands the act of judgment, the isolation, circulation, and exchange of properties, to be structured “like figures in general, metaphors in particular.” The performative character of the self in Fichte’s dialectic serves de Man as the basis for a theory of tropes. Fichte’s system is conceived of as an allegory that narrativizes the interaction between tropes and performativity as an act of positing. Returning to Schlegel, de Man comments on the figure of the buffo, the figure that appears in *Lyceum* Fragment 42, where it is associated with the interruption of narrative illusion, or parabasis: “The buffo, what Schlegel refers to in commedia dell’arte, is the disruption of narrative illusion, the *aparté*, the aside to the audience, by means of which the illusion of fiction is broken (what we call in German *aus der Rolle fallen*, to drop out of your role)” (178). This sets up a modified definition of irony: “irony is the permanent parabasis of the allegory of the theory of tropes” (179). Irony undermines narrative by disrupting and interrupting its systematicity and temporal coherence. In this sense, irony can be said to be a performativization of rhetoric in which an interruption or a shift in rhetorical registers effects a radical instability of meaning and the destruction of the form.<sup>48</sup>

Under the sign of irony, so conceived, the distinction between text and context becomes blurred in the novel, reflecting the form’s ambivalence toward what we have called its “literal” and “literary” registers, and, instantiating, for all practical purposes, the killing of the novel form as the “host” of both “parasitic” and “serious” discourse. Indeed, the ironic dissonance in/of the Victorian novel can be read through the form’s oblique relation to the performative force of language as the “permanent

parabasis" of its rhetorical and "historical" structures of reference. But the mutual interruption or permanent parabasis of these structures holds the very notion of referentiality in abeyance, for, as we saw above, it is by virtue of its performative, nonreferential force that irony functions as a force of "dissonance" in the novel. This force of dissonance is material insofar as it disrupts the narrative and representational orders of the novel and thereby leaves a textual trace. Ironic interruption is an event in which "fact" and "fiction" cease to be strategically interchangeable, making visible the materiality of language as such.

The notion of a "material event" is difficult to grasp, not least because it is nonphenomenizable.<sup>49</sup> The materiality of language is what remains when the text is evacuated of its historical and humanistic determinations and can therefore only be accessed in language by means of its allegorizations, even, or especially, when these are of a performative order. It is indeed tempting to equate the materiality of language with the institutional history of performative speech acts in order to claim that the novel is itself an act of speech that has real effects in the world. But this would be to confuse, as de Man once put it, "the materiality of the signifier with the materiality of what it signifies."<sup>50</sup> In this case, it would be to confuse the performative as an institutionally sanctioned speech act (as in Austin) and the performative as an act of positing (or in Andrzej Warminski's phrasing, a "super-performative"). It is only when the novel's constative and performative structures of reference interrupt each other that a material textual event occurs, an event that gets disseminated along the narrative line and turns into the "permanent parabasis" or "dissonance" that we have identified with irony.

Accordingly, the narrative paradox of performative infelicity can now be understood to be a radicalization of the disjunction between constative and performative registers, a disruption for which the novel cannot account even as it becomes the very condition of possibility of its own production as a realistic verbal medium of representation. Since it *cannot* account for the disruptive act of positing that inaugurates it as text, it must nevertheless represent it by performing an act of closure on the order of institutional performatives ("I do" as happy ending) that at one and the same time becomes the material trace of its own origin. The same can be said, incidentally, of our own critical processing of this predicament: we cannot grasp the materiality of language unless we can think of it in a historical, "materialist" context. When Derrida refers to what de Man, at the closural moment of his essay "Phenomenality and Materiality

in Kant," calls the "prosaic materiality of the letter" as a materiality that is not a thing or a body but that yet "operates" and "forces," a "materiality without matter," he is attempting to preserve the radical unreappropriability of this force of language to language itself.<sup>51</sup> Put differently: the moment you begin to talk about it as a linguistic force, you are already relying on a descriptive, constative language to make the point.

From this perspective, the realist novel comes into focus as one of the most complete systems of cultural reappropriation ever devised by the West. With its capacious busyness, its seductive intimacies, and its endless chattiness, the novel works hard against its own unraveling. We have already analyzed the narrative paradox of performative infelicity in this context, but consider, as an experiential instance of this paradox, the manner in which suspense operates in the classic detective novel. Clues are strewn throughout the narrative as so many opportunities for signification, but only one or perhaps two clues will turn out to give the text cognitive coherence. Mystery is premised on the promise of reestablished epistemological order in the face of disruption, divergence, interruption. In Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, to take an obvious Victorian example of the genre, the narrative seems to come undone every time a clue is misread. Even Sergeant Cuff, who has "never met with such a thing as a trifle," is misled in his investigation by an aberrant clue and fails, at least at first, to find the missing diamond.<sup>52</sup> In a novel with multiple narrators, detection becomes a collaborative endeavor that manages, after structural hesitations and plenty of suspenseful misdirection, to restore the social order by domesticating the semantic ambiguity of what turns out to be the narrative's central clue: a "small smear" on a freshly painted door. In the world of detective fiction, clues are categorically material, objects whose significance must be construed according to the laws of scientific empiricism. Yet, in a narrative form that depends on their semantic instability to create suspense, clues are also the material traces of a force of narrative disruption to whose performative violence the mystery's solution can only attest by the implacability of its logic. The "small smear on the door" is the trace (the "smear") of a material linguistic event whose performance is the condition of possibility of the very narrative that will endeavor to repress it.

The reappropriative dynamic of the realist novel has often been equated with an ideological function that is easily identified but whose discursive logic is difficult to articulate. In its negative ascription, the dreadful history of censorship illustrates only too vividly that literature is



perceived to have the power to subvert conventions and corrupt the morals of the young, but this power is often better felt than understood. The dismissal of the most celebrated censorship case mounted against the realist novel in the nineteenth century, the trial of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, might well have been hailed as a triumph for freedom of speech, but it was also untenable on evidentiary grounds. It was not so much that the prosecutors did not read the novel well (this was the case for the defense); rather, it was that it read it too well. The novel's power had little to do with what was on the page, whether morally offensive or not; it had, in the last instance, everything to do with the disruptive, interruptive, aberrant character of its discourse as a novel meant to encapsulate the values of the state. It threatened to undo, like every novel carefully read threatens to undo, the very linguistic order that would guarantee that judgments made in court (and, for that matter, any institutionally based performative speech act) secure uptake.<sup>53</sup>

The positive ascription of novelistic reappropriation is, perhaps unsurprisingly, the figure of the individual; indeed, no greater fiction was ever produced by the realist novel in this manner than the individual. The biographical, character-centered modality of the novel tends to support this claim, but it is made stronger when one considers that the representation of how a character is formed (think of the *Bildungsroman*) almost always involves marriage and inheritance. The Victorian novel's abiding obsession with events brought off by performative speech acts becomes in this context an expression of the institutional prerogative it follows so as to control the fate of its language. The point is as follows: the performative, as an act that helps regulate the identity of the individual in "reality," becomes in its narrative infelicity the trace structure of an event for which the novel cannot account except by approximating it as an institutional act. In Austin's formulation of the performative, the presence of the speaker guarantees the intention of the utterance; and, conversely, the need for "sincerity" is a condition of happiness that secures the speaker's presence.<sup>54</sup> The Victorian novel certainly mobilizes the category of intention to encompass the narrative life of its characters, but the problematic assimilation of characters "in the process of becoming" (to use Lukács's characterization of the problematic individual) within this category creates discontinuities in the novel's biographical form that cannot be fully accounted for by the vagaries of narrative "action." The narrative's desire to give its characters the self-presence of actors, as though figures themselves for individual agency, produces the "effect" of intention, an "ef-

fect" that, insofar as it installs the figure of the individual within a language of consecration, can be considered the self-conscious aim of Victorian narrative as a whole. Moreover, de Man's conceptualization of irony, based as it is on the assumption that the theory of tropes emerges from the exchange of properties between a posited "I" and its opposite, the "not-I," allows us to call this "effect" the literalization of an allegory of subjectivity, or, as we shall see in more detail below, a subject event.

Something like the aftereffect or by-product of this "effect" can be observed lingering in the traditional critical view that considers the novel as the symbolic repository of bourgeois individualism. Ian Watt describes the production and reception of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* this way:

The novel's serious concern with the daily lives of ordinary people seems to depend upon two important general conditions: the society must value every individual highly enough to consider him the proper subject of its serious literature; and there must be enough variety of belief and action among ordinary people for a detailed account of them to be of interest to other ordinary people, the readers of novels. It is probable that neither of these conditions for the existence of the novel obtained very widely until fairly recently, because they both depend on the rise of a society characterised by that vast complex of interdependent factors denoted by the term "individualism."<sup>55</sup>

Watt's notion of "individualism," a narrative elaboration of what we have called the "allegory of subjectivity," gives the Victorian novel—and arguably the culture of "individualism" it inhabits—its fundamental organizing principle. The iteration of the words "ordinary" and "serious" in the passage, however, suggests itself as a point of entry into the fictionality of this particular performance. To be sure, "individualism" was a matter of frequent debate among the Victorians. In the work of Herbert Spencer, for instance, a perfect, self-regulating "individual" endowed with moral "character" becomes the telos of social evolution. While Spencer's notion of individualism, taken to its extreme logical consequences, would render the role of the State unnecessary, Matthew Arnold argues that the State, itself figured as an individual, has a role to play in curbing the excesses of individualism, lest anarchy take hold. For Arnold the individual should cultivate distinction and beauty guided by self-interest, not selfishness.<sup>56</sup> The novel certainly participates in these debates, but the "individual" that it mobilizes for that purpose can no longer be

seen solely as a mythic or archetypal figure fashioned out of a “vast complex of interdependent factors” in the service of economic imperatives.

By focusing on the operation of performative irony in the novel we can gain access to the performativity of such an “individual” and the forces that permit it to avail itself of the form as its symbolic repository. To be sure, a partial typology can be derived from the institutional archives of legislative, judiciary, administrative, economic, scientific, and military acts performed during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Such history would reveal the instrumental role of performative speech acts in the technology of power of the modern state and in what Pierre Bourdieu calls the “symbolic imposition” of legitimated language.<sup>57</sup> By regulating, resolving, and dispensing the terms under which performative speech acts could and should be utilized, such history would tell us, the technocratic state apparatus that came into its own during Victoria’s reign authorized a form of speech that simultaneously guaranteed its proper, self-sustainable functioning and subjected the individual to the discursive discipline under whose terms and within whose limits his legal, sexual, racial, and class status could be performed.<sup>58</sup>

The relative prevalence of performative language use among the middle classes—those “delegated” with the proper “symbolic capital” to speak for power (in both senses), to use Bourdieu’s terms—is at least in part the result of social processes that followed the collapse of the feudal order in Britain and gave the bourgeoisie the power to arrogate performative authority to itself through the institutions under its political control.<sup>59</sup> A provisional checklist of these institutions and the performative authority they exerted can be hastily sketched: religion (in a “world abandoned by God,” the performative offices of the church and its sacraments were, if not entirely taken over by the state, relocated to its institutions); industry (the oppositional stance obtaining between the rising managerial class replacing the feudal aristocracy and empowered by a new discursive authority directed at exploiting labor, and organized labor, which countered with the declarative voice of pamphlets, manifestos, and strikes, arguably created a performative exigency in the class struggle); politics (the propagandistic appeal of the charismatic political leaders of the middle classes, and some of their novelists, gave the “people” a voice that could presumably act); law (parliamentary acts and legislative action were increasingly deployed through a legal system based on evidence and a criminal justice system based on confession); capitalism (in an economy increasingly based on trade, the contract became the basis of com-

mercial exchange and the stock market); education (the instruction, discipline, and formation of subjects, perhaps best symbolized by the examination, the cane, and the diploma, respectively, secured the legitimation of certain discursive practices over others); imperialism (commercial, military, legal, educational, religious, and political discursive technologies were employed to further the administrative and “civilizing” needs of empire).<sup>60</sup> The performative can thus be said to mobilize the logic of social structuration that creates the official form of the class structure of industrial societies, the separation of public and private spheres, the subordination and silencing of women, the subjugation and colonization of territories. Yet, among the social mutations into whose service the performative is pressed—in sum, all the episodes of the history of social action controlled, organized, and redistributed by the production of performative utterances—none seems as germane to the domain of the Victorian novel as the creation of the figure of “man” and the identities, differences, characters, and performances it adopts in becoming a novelizable “individual.” But the “historical” and rhetorical sedimentation of the figure remains imperfect, a mere imperative to self-presence, a dead letter: raw material as distant from “nature” as the stubborn logic of its performance.

### 5. *Subject Events*

As the work of Judith Butler has shown, a performative model of subject formation cannot be thought apart from its implication in regulatory practices operating within discursive regimes that circumscribe the “materiality” of the subject through the citationality of norms. According to Butler, the subject is not a purely linguistic function; rather, it is “constructed” in or by “a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter.”<sup>61</sup> For Butler, materialization is something like a citationality of regulatory norms that, in complicity with power, forms the “I” through the constitutive force of exclusion, erasure, violent foreclosure, and abjection. Butler does not in this instance cite de Man, but her conceptualization of materiality as a linguistic operation formalizes the passage from the constative to the performative that for de Man characterizes the position literary language (the language of narrative) takes when having to account for the radical instability of its material force as the very source of its textual productivity. It therefore also represents a sharpening of her conceptualization of perfor-

mativity, which in its previous formulation (in *Gender Trouble*) opened itself up to criticism in that the theatricality of gender impersonation could too easily be taken as a “nonserious” or “parasitic” use of performative language. By insisting that the hyperbolic performance of gender only makes visible the mechanisms of subject constitution and that it does not in itself provide such a mechanism, Butler clarified and complicated the role of language in the performance of gender, granting, on the one hand, that the force of language is disruptive and not in itself constructive and yet asserting, on the other, that the sedimentation of the reappropriated language of performance-as-act has a cultural or social dimension. She does not put it this way, but the process of subject materialization she describes is no different in kind than the textual practice whereby the individual is novelized. The subject cannot be thought apart from its novelization as subject; the material event that instantiates it in the ironic interruption of constative and performative registers is therefore an event of subjectivity, or, better, a subject event.

Within the normative discursivity of the Victorian novel, the “historical” structures of reference implied by the notion of “discursive regimes” (Foucault as inflected by Butler) and the kind of linguistic citationality that materializes the “I” (Lacan and Derrida as inflected by Butler) can be traced through the categories narrative employs to allegorize the socialization of characters. As the novel strives to endow the subject with predicates that emerge in a performative operation as something like the symbolic remainders of constative discourse, the subject becomes both a pure representation and a representative figure. The subject, in other words, becomes sedimented through the rhetorical figuration of individualism as a “historical-social type,” to use Lukács’s characterization of the hero of the historical novel.<sup>62</sup> Categories such as sex, class, citizenship, and race are constructed within the thematics of the marriage and inheritance plots and through the performative forces governing the acts of individuation that anchor their narrative organization. The Victorian novel’s considerable narrative appetite for assembling the appropriate circumstances needed for a performative speech act to “secure uptake” can thus be read as part of a regulatory mechanism designed to ensure that goals such as marriage and inheritance be attained only through adherence to a set of disciplinary protocols in the service of the economic, sexual, and national interests of the bourgeoisie.

Borrowing from psychoanalysis the notion of foreclosure, Butler argues that implicit censorship (not unlike the preemptive action of foreclo-

sure in psychosis) gives rise to the “domain of speakability” within which the subject is produced.<sup>63</sup> As opposed to repression, foreclosure “bars” a fundamental signifier from the subject’s symbolic universe; it does not integrate it into the unconscious. Moreover, the foreclosed signifier does not “return,” as in repression; rather, it “re-emerges” in the “Real,” most commonly in the form of a hallucination.<sup>64</sup> For Butler, the psychoanalytic model of foreclosure can be “misappropriated” in order to show that censorship (like foreclosure) is not a singular act, but rather the reiterated effect of a structure that raises a “bar” as a result of which the subject emerges. “The condition for the subject’s survival is precisely the foreclosure of what threatens the subject most fundamentally; thus, the ‘bar’ produces the threat and defends against it at the same time” (135). The reiterated action of “barring” characteristic of foreclosure, according to Butler, is performative in nature, and the formation of the subject is, as a result, tied to the “circumscribed production of the domain of the speakable” (139).

For the purposes of the present argument, we can “misappropriate” the notion of foreclosure in order to formulate the following hypothesis: the performative force of language is foreclosed by the novel’s discursive protocols and re-emerges in the form of the “ordinary predicates” of the subject produced as a result of such foreclosure. Butler does not contemplate the possibility that the performative force of foreclosure foreclose the performative force of language, but the novel, as the symbolic repository of the “Real,” allows us to read such foreclosure as the condition of possibility of (constative) narrative and the re-emergence of the foreclosed performative force as the performance of the material subject-predicates of a hallucinated “individual.” Indeed, it is the implicit censorship of performative language use in the period under consideration that, for instance, “bars” women from performing the sort of speech acts that consolidate the public sphere as the exclusive domain of men; men from speaking the name of their love for men; the lower classes from gaining access to the discursive “privileges” of the middle classes; the “lower” races from declaring their “civilized” humanity. These institutionally erected “bars” that exert the performative foreclosure of certain forms of performativity act as the very foundations of the performativity of the “individual.”

The materiality of the “ordinary predicates” so formed, we have been arguing, can be read in the Victorian novel by submitting the “historical” and rhetorical structures of reference made significant by the performa-

tive force of language to both “literary” and “literal” reading protocols. These material subject events performed in and by the novel re-emerge literally as allegorical figures of performativity (character personified) or literarily as subject effects of social theatricality (characters acting “in character”). We have called the material sedimentations that emerge at the points at which these structures of reference interrupt each other “subject events,” but these must be understood as something like a cat-achresis of performativity itself. For, just as the materiality of language is a “materiality without matter,” so too is the subjectivity of the novel a subjectivity without a subject. This, in turn, might offer a provisional definition of the character-centered Victorian novel: subjectivity without a subject.

The foreclosure of the performative in the Victorian novel is thus the condition of possibility of its disciplined re-emergence as the illocutionary hallucination of the performative as a material event of subjectivity that emerges in a discursive nexus that can be generally named “impersonation.” As a mode of performance that disavows its own performativity, the subject event of impersonation becomes the allegorical form of “subjectivity without a subject”: the buffo “masquerading” as a subject as though its inscription *as* a subject had been constituted by performative speech acts that were in fact suspended in the constative supposition of their unhappy execution. Impersonation thus allegorizes the literary undoing of the very performative forces to which the novel, in its social ambitions, would purport to lay claim. Through the trope of impersonation, the Victorian novel thus becomes the repository not of bourgeois individualism as such, but of the “effects” by which the individual appears to be a self present to itself. By attending to the material events through which impersonation becomes sedimented as the novel’s trope for “individualism” we can gain access to the production of identity “in character” as well as to the possibilities of acting “out of character” (*aus der Rolle fallen*). In this sense, the material events to which performatives give rise can be understood to produce or “perform” the bourgeois individual; another matter is whether the individual is a fiction sustainable outside the confines of the Victorian novel.