

PREFACE: “*I do*”

I can trace the original idea for this book back to a singular event: the parallel reading of J. L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* and Dickens’s *Bleak House*. As my attention shuttled between these two texts, Dickens’s novel became the perfect medium for tracking and testing Austin’s formulation of performative speech acts, “I do,” “I promise,” “I bequeath,” and so on, just as Austin’s lectures provided a perfect catalog of acts for organizing the crowded character system in *Bleak House*. Well, almost perfect: I soon realized that a happy performative was hard to come by. This was disappointing, but not very surprising in a novel that treats the failure of institutions through the story of an endless inheritance case. Yet, from the perspective of speech acts, this failure seemed excessive; how, I wondered, could an act as simply formulated as “I bequeath” give rise to a whole novel, wreak such havoc among its characters, generate so much text, and, in the end, come to nought? Reflecting on other novels of the period, I noticed that many of their plots hinged on the infelicity of a speech act: Jane Eyre’s failed attempt to marry Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, John Harmon’s inability to reclaim his real name in *Our Mutual Friend*, Becky Sharp’s vain attempt to climb the social ladder in Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, Lydgate’s debts and Dorothea’s unhappy marriage in *Middlemarch*, Sir Percival’s forgery in Collins’s *The Woman in White*, and so on. What if every novel could be reduced to one or two speech acts whose failure would then become the premise of its narrative? It took some time to disentangle the full implications of the encounter my reading habits had staged between Austin and Dickens, and, even as the argument this encounter inaugurated took me far afield, these initial considerations nevertheless retain for me something of the magic of their spell.

To put speech act theory and literary forms into productive dialogue with each other is not in itself a terribly original idea, of course, but developments in the field of novel studies in the last thirty years, as well as in the culture that this field inhabits, have given the task of formulating a

theory of literary performativity a renewed sense of urgency. Cultural studies, to construe these developments broadly, has placed an interpretive onus on the productive powers of literature, describing in its best moments its implication in the formation of the nation, its complicity in the consolidation of empire, and its participation in the construction of gendered, racialized, and otherwise minoritized subjects. The field has been less successful, however, in providing mechanisms to account for the novel's agency in these complex historical processes, insisting perhaps too forcefully on the power of literary representation to alone drive its cultural work. Representation, no doubt, constitutes one of the novel's most powerful means of persuading, coercing, and disciplining individuals; but it is not the only means of achieving such an end, nor indeed is such an end the only way of conceptualizing the novel's ability to leave a trace in the world. The historicity of the realist novel as I conceive it in the present book results from a complex interaction between the novel's ability to represent acts and its ability to perform them.

With few exceptions, the study of the novel has proceeded without adequate attention paid to the performative dimension of its discourse. This general neglect is surprising, not least because the cultural processes in which we claim that the novel participates are themselves performative in nature. When we think about the creation of nations, the administration of empire, or the construction of the subject we do not immediately think of these processes as being accomplished primarily by verbal representations. We would most likely identify the performative force of language as the verbal capability most liable to change the world insofar as the world we know is itself organized by institutional systems whose acts are carried out by means of speech acts. But the omission is particularly striking in the case of the nineteenth-century English novel considering that its constitutive narratives are structured around events regulated by performative speech acts. The marriage plot and the inheritance plot, to name its two determinant plot patterns, are hinged on questions of whether, by whom, and in what manner the acts of betrothal and of bequeathal will have been brought about, or, to put it in terms of speech acts, on the circumstances under which the novel's protagonists will have uttered the simple performative formulas "I do" and "I bequeath." *The Novel as Event* contends that, given the novel's abiding interest in the way language acts in the world, a full account of the novel's historical role must take into consideration the performative effects of its own discourse.

Accordingly, this book endeavors to determine the extent to which

the novel can itself be considered an event, to describe the nature of this event, and to examine the rhetorical, formal, and discursive circumstances under which such event materializes itself. To think of the novel as an event is perhaps counterintuitive since we tend to associate its length with bulk and its narrative complexity with material substance. The advent of electronic books may well alter that perception, but in the meantime it is worth remarking that the object-ness of literature is a nineteenth-century phenomenon, not an essential attribute of the literary. Indeed, the novel is the first great success story of the culture industry, a product whose mechanical reproducibility enabled its dissemination on an unprecedented scale through a vast distribution network that spanned the globe. But this is the story of many products in the age of capitalist expansion about which we would never make the sorts of claims that we now make about the novel. Coats, for instance, had an enormous impact on the relations of production and the class struggle in Victorian England, but it would be woefully inadequate or merely hyperbolic to say that coats formed the nation, created the empire, or “made the man.” Novels are of course special, overdetermined products that enjoy relative autonomy, but they are overdetermined in spite of, or aside from, being at base an object.

The point, which I shall not belabor any further here, is that the novel can do what it does, if it does anything at all, by virtue of its literary characteristics and not its material status as an object. The ability to represent the reality it inhabits is perhaps the most conspicuous and certainly the most studied literary aspect of the novel, but, since it depends on a referential relation to the material world (in contradistinction to pure fantasy or allegory), it tends to reinforce its object status insofar as it inevitably leads to an inside/outside binary that is very difficult to overcome. Roland Barthes’s use of the figure of a fruit (like an apricot) to describe the traditional textual binary of form (flesh) and content (pit) reminds us that the object-status of the novel—or, rather, the fact that we view it as an object—tends also to determine the categories we employ to read it. To read the novel as an event, as I read it in the present book, means that we need to reexamine from the point of view of their performativity the referential categories that have for long served as the linchpins of our criticism. I look at the performativity of plot, character, realism, voice, and affect in each of this book’s chapters.

But to read the novel as an event rather than as an object need not mean that the novel’s effects on the world are any less material, nor, for

that matter, that representations are not eventful. Certain theories of ideology, for instance, are premised on the notion that ideology represents the imaginary conditions of individuals to their real conditions of existence, but, in this case, “representation” (Althusser places it within scare quotes) is eventful not, or not only, because it is referential, but because it is material, existing in an apparatus and functioning as a practice. Representations appeal to the subject directly (or interpellate it) and thereby alter the world, but this form of appeal is of the order of the performative, which is a nonreferential, nonrepresentational linguistic force. New historicism describes this power in great detail but does not name it. Considered from the point of view of its “eventness” (an ugly word of which I sometimes make use), the historicity of the novel must be understood to result from the impact of forces rather than the play of reference.

In the book’s argument it therefore becomes all the more necessary to distinguish an act from its representation in order to determine the novel’s material role in culture. More than its capacity to represent the material culture it inhabits or even its own status within it as an overdetermined object that is itself produced, distributed, and consumed, it is the materiality of the novel’s discourse that is shown to be responsible for the form’s historicity. As currently configured, the field of novel studies approaches the materiality of the realist novel from one of two more or less complementary perspectives: in one account, the novel depicts a rich object world whose individual elements and sensory effects can be interpreted as the material indices of a larger historical and cultural reality; in another account, the novel’s own status as an object within this world of objects is investigated for its own sake, and the various material practices that go into the production, dissemination, and consumption of the literary object are examined in the context of the literary marketplace. It is one of the field’s founding ironies that the emphasis on the representational and physical aspects of the novel tends to occlude the materiality of the very material of which the novel is made: its language.

When I began to think seriously about this project, the question of critical affiliation was not uppermost in my mind; I just followed my nose. I was not of course surprised, nor sorry, to find that the readings on speech acts toward which I was drawn were for the most part in the tradition of deconstruction. I am happy to acknowledge that my thinking about performativity and the materiality of language is both indebted and informed by the work of Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, J. Hillis Miller, Barbara Johnson, and other readers of Austin, but perhaps a few

words are in order regarding the status of theory in this project, not least because in some quarters theory is viewed with suspicion, hostility, or, worse, indifference. This sort of *apologia* is of course part of the tradition, and I here rehearse it only to mark theory's usefulness to me since no particular personal or institutional bond obliges me to weigh in on the ugliness of the so-called de Man affair. Theory, in any case, needs no defending if only because, to the extent that we are not practitioners, we are all theoreticians of literature. No matter how removed our work may feel from the rarefied air of high theory, the claims we make about the literary objects we study are informed and in many cases licensed by theoretical insights that nevertheless remain largely unacknowledged. In the case of novel studies—traditionally, not the most suitable culture medium for growing theory—the influence of theory is unmistakable, but repressed. The recent interest in the culture of liberalism, for instance, at first blush appears to comprise a deliberate turn away from theory, but the selection criteria and critical method used to bring historical density to bear on the question of the liberal subject owe their coherence to Foucault's theory of subject formation, no matter how critically or implicitly it is engaged. Indeed, many of the critical paradigms currently in use in historicist studies can trace their genealogy back to what is still the single most influential claim made about the novel's agency in the last three decades: the claim that the novel produces, as D. A. Miller (who freely acknowledges the usefulness of Foucault's theory) puts it, "a stable, centered subject in a stable, centered world." Whether the novel's project of subject formation is understood to have failed, or worked only too well, Foucault's imprint is everywhere visible.

The argument of *The Novel as Event* submits this critical configuration to the speculative pressure of speech act theory in order to model a novelistic mechanism of subject formation that accounts for the performative force of its discourse. While this model is based on discursive agency, it allows for a capacious view of subject formation derived from the poststructuralist view that, to the extent that we wish to reaffirm it, the subject is a complex amalgam resulting from the somewhat haphazard confluence of linguistic, psychological, ideological, disciplinary, biological, and technological forces over which it does not exercise full control. Judith Butler's conceptualization of performativity exerts its influence on the project as a whole, but perhaps most insistently on the question of the materialization of the subject since it provides a valuable link to the debates clustered around matter, materialism, materialization, and materiality with which

this book engages. The argument of the book departs from these models in suggesting that the performative materialization of the subject cannot be thought apart from the novel. To posit the subject is also to inscribe it within a narrative of subjectivity or, to put it in a slightly different way, the subject is always already novelized. In the course of the argument, I call these novelized performances of subjectivity “subject events” to emphasize the materiality of the linguistic acts that produce them.

The Novel as Event stages readings of five English novels: Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend*, Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, and Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*. The study is centered on the Victorian period in England for theoretical as well as for pragmatic reasons. The complex social, cultural, economic, scientific, and political processes that completely transformed in a matter of some fifty years what was still at the end of the eighteenth century a largely agricultural society into a highly developed industrial nation with a vast overseas empire and commercial interests spanning the rest of the globe could not have been enabled without an efficiently run state apparatus whose legal, military, and bureaucratic institutions could carry out its various programs. To be sure, this massive task entailed the use of repressive force and advanced technological capacity, but what made it so devastatingly effective was the fact that it was largely made possible by the use of discursive instruments whose performative force allowed power to transcend physical force.

Performative language indeed is the language of contracts, laws, orders, wills, sentences, promises, and many other acts that are essential to the functioning of a highly bureaucratized society. The emergence of the realist novel as the dominant narrative form during a period characterized by such an explosion of performative language use can be attributed to the fact that the constitution of the liberal subject—the narrative determinant of the novel as a form—is also regulated by performative speech. The subject is shaped by what Pierre Bourdieu calls “rites of institution,” acts that legitimate the individual’s social role. In the influential genre of the *Bildungsroman*, the young protagonist’s narrative of social accommodation is often articulated as an apprenticeship in how to assemble the conditions necessary for bringing about a successful marriage or for coming into a hereditary fortune, both of which rites are premised on the performative force that can make them happen. Insofar as these rites are institutionally sanctioned, the English *Bildungsroman*, as Franco Moretti has shown, is a symbolic form that reaffirms belief in a “culture of justice.”

It is also for this reason that novels from outside of the English tradition are not included in this study. Speech acts are of course operative everywhere, including, for example, in the French realist novel, but the performative does not articulate, in its failure, the narrative dynamics of its principal plot patterns: Rastignac's social trajectory, Emma Bovary's adultery, Zola's department store may well be instrumentalized by performative speech acts, but their narrative is not constricted by the need to render them felicitous. In the English novel, in contrast, the use of performative speech is construed as a narrative problem the solution to which inevitably leads to a "happy ending" that is also an affirmation of the need to face it *as* a problem. The narrative complications to which this particular problem gives rise are at the very core of the English novel, determining the conduct, attitude, and prerogatives of its protagonists and giving form to sprawling plots whose endgame, with astonishing regularity, resolves into the utterance of a single performative formula, "I do," the novel's preferred closural act. But it is also a problem Victorian novelists must face as they attempt to make good on the promise they and their texts make to change the world. Whether their aim is reforming the law (Dickens, Collins) or exposing the ideology of egoism (Thackeray, Eliot), they are forced to push the linguistic capacity of the novel beyond its ability to represent reality in order the better to shape it. Indeed, the acute linguistic intuitions and seasoned practical knowledge of the novelists I consider in this book suggest that when writers began to think seriously about the ability of language to act they made important discoveries about the linguistic constitution of the legal, sexual, and social identity of the subject that had far-reaching implications for the ethical and political potential of their own work.

The first chapter of this book engages the question of the novel's performativity. The model I propose in it relies on one specific fictional topos: interruption. Interruption is not only a useful narrative device for the creation of suspenseful narratives and a necessary material feature of a lengthy novel's consumption; it is also a condition of possibility for novelistic discourse insofar as it is the fundamental mechanism of irony, a trope first defined by Friedrich Schlegel as "permanent parabasis," or "uninterrupted interruption," and later adopted by Georg Lukács in *The Theory of the Novel* to describe the peculiar formal "dissonance" characteristic of the genre. It is also a trope that sets into motion, according to Paul de Man's elaboration of it, an oscillating movement of performative and constative, figurative and nonfigurative, referential and nonreferential

linguistic elements. Interruption in the realist novel, as I conceive it, produces aberrant or anomalous discursive events that make visible the materiality of its acts and out of which emerge discrete instantiations of subjectivity, or “subject events.”

My reading of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* in the second chapter of this book analyzes the narrative dynamics that make “subject events” possible, focusing specifically on plotting as an activity that not only represents experience but constitutes it materially as well. By offering a new account of the logic of plot based on the deferral of the performative, this chapter overturns scholarship that suggests that narratives are either driven by psychological mechanisms of desire or constructed as analogical structures that map the spatial or temporal coordinates of progress. To “plot” Jane in performative terms is also to plot the overthrow of a conventional system of individuality that excludes her subjectivity by failing to represent her, both in terms of providing an adequate model and in terms of speaking for her. The character of Bertha Mason, in this reading, functions as a figure of unrepresentability that enters into the narrative space of the novel only by disrupting the marriage plot that would have refashioned Jane. In closing I suggest that the performative force of language is the “madwoman in the attic” of realistic representation, threatening at all moments to interrupt the progress of its narratives of individualization.

Turning to the question of characterization in the third chapter, I focus on one of Dickens’s most distinctive literary devices—the secret—as he employs it in the service of the larger project he undertakes in his late works: the description of individual identity. Centered on a reading of *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens’s last completed novel, this chapter shows how the many disguises, impersonations, frauds, and pretenses through which characters negotiate their identity become the very means of acquiring it, short-lived “subject events” that materialize over time into character-subjects whose identity is indistinguishable from “extraliterary” persons. Using Derrida’s treatment of the secret as an inaccessible remainder of our response to the call of the other, this chapter argues that the secret of identity harbors another secret in excess of the self that lies just beneath the surface of representation: the violent materiality of the letter.

The violence of the letter also informs my reading of the death sentence, the most extreme case of language’s ability to act upon the subject, in the fourth chapter of the book. Engaging the historical controversy surrounding the so-called Newgate Novel, the chapter opens with a reading

of “Going to See a Man Hanged,” Thackeray’s journalistic description of a public execution, that shows how literary realism helps install a discursive regime capable of performing public acts of murder. I proceed by tracing the notion of “vanity” in *Vanity Fair* through two related though divergent series of associations: the figure of the mirror, both the emblem of hyperbolic self-representation and the underlying principle of realism itself, and the representation of death in the novel.

The category of “voice” has long served formal criticism to refer to moments of narrative instantiation in which the structure of address shifts from one character to another, from character to narrator, or, more rarely, from narrator to reader. These ventriloquisms tend to create an illusion of presence, intention, and expression at the very center of the realist novel that runs counter to the unstable, irregular, and unpredictable nature of the social forces that install the subject. Using the grammatical model of the “middle voice,” the fifth chapter of the book proposes a logic of speech acts, rather than one of speech, to account for the novelization of experience. It takes as its point of departure the polemical exchange between Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes on the figure of the author, arguing that it in fact hinges on the emphasis each places on the performativity of writing. The reading of *Middlemarch* against which this performative model of voice—middlevoice—is measured focuses on George Eliot’s well-known strategy of interrupting the narrative progression of the story to provide commentary on the action being described. Interruption, in this reading, conditions the possibility of Eliot’s powerful critique of egoism in *Middlemarch*.

In the last chapter of the book, I trace the aberrant or dis-figured figure of the woman-in-white in Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* as an instance of what Gilles Deleuze calls “Figure,” a nonfigurative, nonnarrative, nonillustrative “record of the fact.” I oppose this order of the “figural” to that of the “figurative,” which implies a narrative logic of illustration that corresponds to the “realism” of representation. Affect, as a violent form of sensation, interrupts both orders, appearing in the narrative representation of acts, but also in the action of invisible forces upon the body that cause Figure to tremble, twitch, vibrate. The primary function of Figure is thus to make these invisible forces visible even as they remain inaccessible to the language of representation.

I hereby acknowledge, with pleasure, the many debts I have incurred in the writing of this book, which I wish could be repaid in mere words. To

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