

Paper for MLA (2018) panel: "Dramaturgies of the Ear: Listening to Theory's Scenes"
Hollow Utterance or Expression: Austin with Stein

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Thanks, first, to Steven Meyer for mentioning my *Radio Free Stein* project to Ian Duncan; thanks, as well, both to Ian and Alessandra Campana (of the MLA Forum on Opera and Musical Performance) for encouraging me to submit a proposal to this panel. My paper today takes up the panel's prompt by listening to a scene from J.L Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*, an infamous scene in which theatrical and poetic language are excluded or bracketed: "[A] performative utterance will, for example, be *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."¹ What does this hollowness sound like, and why is it so peculiar? My theatrical example will be an early play by Gertrude Stein titled *He Said It. Monologue* (1915). In interpreting Stein's text as a radio melodrama, I have discovered that this supposed monologue or soliloquy sets multiple voices in extroversive and introversive relations to one another. The spaces within and between its voices, I will suggest, exemplify the theatrical hollowness of performativity, as Austin has it, a hollowness that my paper aims to revalue and reassess by way of a somewhat disparate group of thinkers and theorists.

Let me begin with a brief sketch of *Radio Free Stein* [visual: website], a large-scale sound project that renders a number of Stein's plays in the medium of recorded sound. By producing sonic stagings in collaboration with composers (as well as directors, actors, musicians, sound engineers, and other Stein scholars), I have been able to develop interpretations of some of the lesser-known plays and to locate Stein's landscape poetics

in the contexts of twentieth-century music theater and radio. Initially conceived as a recording project, live performance has now entered the picture. Insert promo here: in just a few weeks, American Opera Projects and Symphony Space will be presenting Daniel Thomas Davis' *SIX.TWENTY.OUTRAGEOUS: Three Gertrude Stein Plays in the Shape of an Opera*, based on a libretto we developed. *Radio Free Stein* has been motivated by a critical question: What can I think and say about Stein's plays after undergoing the process of staging them sonically that I would not otherwise be able to say? My intuition has been that composers informed by John Cage and the tradition of experimental music theater already know something about Stein's theatricality, that is, there is some experiential or tacit knowledge that I am trying to mine.

In its concern with performance this project runs athwart those critics who approach Stein's plays as anti-theatrical linguistic experiments, closet dramas (the unfortunate phrase Martin Puchner has chosen and which does not suit Stein's queer theater) or, as Jane Bowers calls them, metadramas. Bowers's book-length treatment of Stein's metadrama, published twenty-five years ago, is still among the most thoroughgoing and persuasive accounts.² She argues that Stein's plays are antagonistic to the basic conditions of theatrical performance insofar as they foreground language and the activity of writing itself. She asserts, for example, that "Stein's conversation plays [of which *He Said It* is one] appear to be written records of speech acts, and nothing more. They are not windows onto a nonlinguistic world. They are themselves the world--a world of conversations without stories" (11). Whereas Bowers's restricted notion of speech acts opposes linguistic to non-linguistic realms, or text to performance, I have turned to theories of affect to pursue a more complex interweaving or mutual inter-

implication of the verbal with the non-verbal, less an opposition than an unpredictable, generative muddle. I take Austin's own interest in the performative to open up analysis of language to such muddles, if somewhat ambivalently.

Recall, his use of the phrase "hollow or void" refers to the "doctrine of the *Infelicities*" (14), all the ways that explicit performative utterances (such as a bet, a promise, a christening) can go wrong or be unhappy. A performative utterance may be void (for example, you and I try to marry but we are already married to others) or hollow (I utter a promise to drive you to the airport when I have no such intention). The specific *hollowness* of performatives invokes a gap between intention and expression, a psychological gap whose relevance, elsewhere in his lectures, Austin is at some pains to dismiss. A promise issued in bad faith is nonetheless a promise issued ("*our word is our bond*" (10), asserts Austin). Insincerity may lead to unhappy promises (and, perhaps, marriages), but these are hollow, not void. On the stage, however, all promisings, marryings, and other explicit performatives are both hollow and void insofar as they are spoken in quotation marks, examples of language used "not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use... All this we are excluding from consideration" (22). I should immediately say: I take Derrida's critique of Austin in "Signature Event Context" as read here. Austin's consistent use of non-serious language in the stand-up comedy routine first delivered as The William James Lectures at Harvard in 1955 more or less deconstructs itself, leaving, in its wake, an enormously rich collection of concepts and terms, examples and problems, for literary theory and philosophy.³ But I am not returning to Austin primarily in a deconstructive mood. Rather, I take up the hollowness of

unhappy performative utterances as an index to a psychical gap whose relevance for both performativity and theatricality is, precisely, the question.

For Samuel Weber, the hollowness of performativity is constitutive of theatricality as such, a line of thinking I would like to extend here. In his book *Theatricality as Medium* he asserts that "Such hollowness marks separation as a kind of inner space rather than an interval in-between. Theater takes place in the hollow of this separation."⁴ In a footnote Weber describes this hollowness in terms of "the abrupt modulations of the voice" in a Peking Opera performance, an "'expressionist' dynamics...without expressive 'pathos'" (371). His emphasis on vocal intonation, as well as the scare quotes around "expressionist" and "pathos," lead me to think that Weber is gesturing toward some defining role for affect in theatricality. As a good Derridean, however, he is concerned that any explicit reference to affect flirts dangerously with intentionality or self-presence. But a robust conceptualization of affect that shies away from intentionality may well serve as a hinge category that lets us link linguistic performativity, on the one hand, to performativity in the theatrical sense, on the other.

In a cantankerous essay from ten years ago, J. Hillis Miller hypothesizes that these different kinds of performativity have "practically nothing to do" with one another and offers a helpful genealogy that ends with this caveat: "these various forms of performativity, different as they are from one another, have a family resemblance, in the Wittgensteinian sense."⁵ Other theorists (of a Wittgensteinian bent) have revised or expanded Austin's terms in an effort to understand this family resemblance. Eve Sedgwick's notion of periperformatives, those utterances that cluster around explicit performatives (for example, "I cannot promise" or "I don't ask anything whatever of

you"), brings into focus those political and affective situations that explicit performatives require but place firmly off-stage or out of bounds for analysis. Her goal is not to "hiv[e] off a depersonalized understanding of performative force from a psychologized and spatial understanding of affective force."⁶ A similar psychologizing and spatializing impulse can be found in Stanley Cavell's notion of the passionate utterance which, unlike Sedgwick's work, explains Austin's idea of perlocutionary force.⁷ Both these theorists practice the kind of attention that Austin, at some moments in his lectures, appears to invite: "what we have to study is *not* the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech situation" (139); or, again, "The total speech act in the total speech situation is the *only actual* phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating" (148).

Rather than a fantasy of taxonomic mastery or exhaustive description of context (what Derrida has shown to be impossible), we may hear in Austin's "total speech situation" what object-relations calls the total situation, that is, the transferential circumstances of interpretation in which nothing is, in principle, off limits or excluded from analysis. I have argued (in the introduction to my book *Transferential Poetics, from Poe to Warhol*) that it is possible to supplement Derrida's early critique of structuralist linguistics with a theory of motivation other than Freud's - specifically, with the affect theories of Silvan Tomkins and Melanie Klein. The resulting theoretical framework begins from the idea that writing can be more or less theatricalizing, that is, more or less reflexive about how writing both frames and is framed by affective experience, a reciprocal framing that happens in space and time, on the ground of the page that is also a stage for the minimal performance of reading. In this approach, the situation of reading and the reader, become figural.

Certainly, Stein's writing is theatricalizing in this sense: it invites or requires us to become aware of our (confusing, enjoyable, frustrating) reading experience. Consider *He Said It. Monologue* [visual: play text], one of the plays that Stein wrote during the wartime year she and Toklas spent in Mallorca away from the Paris air raids and coal shortages. A reader is immediately faced with a number of questions about this play as a play. For example, how many voices is it written for? Its subtitle implies that we should read the text as if it were being recited by a single masculine voice, but its first lines contradict this idea: "Spoken./ In English./ Always spoken./ Between them." These lines appear to describe the play's setting, a dialogue between at least two persons, an interpretation supported by what follows, a conversational give-and-take between first- and second-persons. In the *Radio Free Stein* workshop on this play we debated how best to resolve the contradiction between subtitle and dialogue form. The libretto that I developed (in collaboration with Ada Smailbegovic) cast the play for piano and two women's voices, Speaker and Hearer. These voices recall and recreate a man's monologue, while the piano offers a musical rendering of the monologue. Formally, the piece became a melodrama in the late-eighteenth-century sense in which instrumental music introduces and is interspersed between spoken dialogue. In our recording, the women's voices are accompanied by lower, quieter subvocalizations that qualify, contradict, or otherwise reinflect what has been said. The pianist, who is also the Narrator, occasionally comments on the women's recollections and recreations. The genre, we decided, is distressed comedy. [audio: play scene 1]

I am hoping you can hear the intimate relation many of these lines have to explicit performative utterances, even while there aren't any. Still, almost every line has

illocutionary force of some kind and can be assessed by way of the various classes of utterance that Austin lists in his last lecture. Examples include verdictives, such the appraisal "I consider it very healthy to eat sugared prunes"; expositives, such as "This I know"; and behabitives, such as "I am not pleased./ I am delighted." You will be delighted to hear that I have no wish to classify all the utterances in Stein's play. I prefer to bring your attention to the exchanges that take place, not only between first- and second-persons, but within each person as well. The subvocalizations of Speaker and Hearer create the kind of hollow spaces between intention and expression that Austin has identified: they are distinct illocutionary acts that create distinct perlocutionary effects, that is, they frame communication in affective terms. To listen to Stein is to become aware of the interplay between doing and feeling in words, an awareness that multiplies sensory modalities without excluding reference. Rather, reference comes to have no greater force, but also no lesser force, than illocutionary acts and perlocutionary effects. We can read "a desire for white handkerchiefs" as a wish to witness a gesture of surrender, in the play's historical context, an end to the war that had displaced Stein and Toklas from their home. "You shall have it," then, becomes an aggressive gratification of such a wish for peace that is immediately ironized: "Dear me."

Like other Mallorcan plays, *He Said It* explores the space of these two American women who watch the war from the sidelines. This context is scattered throughout, for example, in sentences referring to flags ("Do you like flags. I believe in painting them") and navies ("Who can be willing to leave an American boat," "Governed. Do be governed"), but, as always in Stein's writing, this historical context is intertwined with the process of writing in its domestic setting. Consider those lines that invoke defecation (the

advice to eat dried fruit and its satisfying results) and reproduction (copying as one of the "obligations of maternity"), physiological analogues for making or producing. The play ends with a picnic that includes "False smuggled contraband tobacco. You mean by that that it isn't tobacco. No it's only leaves. I laugh." The phrase "False smuggled contraband tobacco" is almost a triple negative, and the expositive ("You mean by that that it isn't tobacco") brings our attention to its many meanings. We are left with "only leaves," the paper on which the play has been written, and a stated response "I laugh," a mixed utterance if ever there was one.

To conclude by way of an indication as to where I would like this line of thinking to go. Consider that each of the theorists I briefly discussed not only share an impulse toward spatialization, but also invoke operatic moments in their critiques of Austin and elaborations of performativity. I have mentioned Weber's Peking Opera performance; Hillis Miller refers to a scene in *Daniel Deronda* in which Gwendolyn Harleth sings Bellini; Sedgwick introduces what she calls an "extraordinary periperformative aria" (73) in *The Golden Bowl*; and several key examples in Cavell are from the canon of European opera. It is no accident that music or musical figuration appears at just that moment when affectivity is summoned to make sense of linguistic performativity. I have some trepidation about entering that disciplinary minefield of the philosophy of music, but have found Peter Kivy's work on this subject in his book *Sound Sentiment* of interest. Here, I will mention his more recent essay on the aesthetics of literature, *The Performance of Reading*, which pursues analogies between reading and experiences of musical performance. In brief, Kivy argues that the silent performance of reading takes

place, not in the theater of the mind's eye but that of the mind's ear.⁸ What usefully emerges, for my purposes, is a theory of reading as a form of interoception.

Kivy does not use this word, which I first encountered in the work of Silvan Tomkins for whom interoception is a crucial aspect of how we perceive facial expression. Recall, according to Tomkins, the face is the primary organ of affect, with the skin and musculature of the face where affect takes place. The face (as well as the voice, although Tomkins does not make much of this) communicates affect both outward (to others) and inwards (to the self).

This skill in interpreting the facial expression of others is aided or hindered by an isomorphism between the visual face of the other and the interoceptive face of the self. Although the feedback from our own face is in non-visual modalities, we learn the rules of translation between what the face looks like to what it feels like and from both of these to the motor language, so that eventually we are capable of imitating either what a face looks like or what it feels like... These rules of translation between the motor, visual, and kinaesthetic languages are analogous to the way in which we learn to write as we listen to a lecture or read a book, or as a mute person learns to speak with his fingers. (1, 216-17)

We have a changing phantom face that we carry around within us all the time. The multiple translations between this "interoceptive face of the self" and the visual awareness of the faces of others permit us to recognize expressions of affect. Similarly, I would suggest, it is the interoceptive or phantom tongue, voice, and ear that lets us engage in the performance of reading. The "hollowness" of Austin's theatrical

performative, then, is an aural figure for precisely this kind of inner spatialization and translation, the psychical space opened up by the communication inwards of muted language in silent reading as this involves intonational, affective interpretation. Stein's plays require us to attend to these interoceptive relations of language and affect in order make any sense of them at all.

¹ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Harvard UP, 1962), 22.

² Jane Palatini Bowers, *"They Watch Me as They Watch This": Gertrude Stein's Metadrama* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991). See also Bowers' essay in *Land/Scape/Theater*. More recent book-length treatments of Stein's theater include Sarah Bay-Cheng, *Mama Dada: Gertrude Stein's Avant-Garde Theater* (Routledge, 2004) and Leslie Atkins Durham, *Staging Gertrude Stein: Absence, Culture, and the Landscape of American Alternative Theatre* (Palgrave, 2005).

³ Jacques Derrida, "Signtaure Event Context," in *Limited Inc* (Northwestern University Press, 1988). Translated by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman.

⁴ Samuel Weber, *Theatricality as Medium* (Fordham UP, 2004), 9, 27.

⁵ J. Hillis Miller, "Performativity as Performance/ Performativity as Speech Act: Derrida's Special Theory of Performativity," in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106:2 (2007), 233. For another helpful genealogy of the concept, see James Loxley, *Performativity* (Routledge, 2007).

⁶ Eve Sedgwick, "Around the Performative: Periperformative Vicinities in Nineteenth-Century Narrative," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Peformativity* (Duke UP, 2003), 90.

⁷ Stanley Cavell, "Passionate and Performative Utterance: Morals of Encounter," in Russell B. Goodman, ed., *Contending with Stanley Cavell* (Oxford UP, 2005), 189. Cavell introduces this category of passionate utterance in his Foreword to Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body* (Stanford UP, 2003).

⁸ Peter Kivy, *The Performance of Reading* (Blackwell, 2006), 66.