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Austin and Antin about "About"

Rei Terada

THIS IS AN ATTEMPT TO READ, in two cases, the meaning of resistance to metalanguage. The notion of metalanguage has long played an allegorical role in the morality play of linguistic debate.¹ To put it melodramatically, metalanguage appears as a superego or an arm of a police state of consciousness; as Jonathan Culler observes, it makes its users "feel securely outside and in control" (199). It follows that instances of resistance to metalanguage register protests against self-deluded sovereignty. Culler continues:

If the best examples of metalinguistic discourse appear within the work, then their authority, which depends on a relation to externality, is highly questionable: they can always be read as part of the work rather than a description of it. In denying their externality we subvert the metalinguistic authority of the critic. (199)

Particularly resonant defeats of metalanguage become psychologically and politically charged liberations of consciousness, miniature occasions for celebration. This story (as Culler implies) is easiest to believe when it is told very quickly. There is another story to tell, in which attempts to produce and to reject metalanguage can trade connotations or look much alike. What is being refused when we refuse metalanguage, and what does the notion of metalanguage itself refuse? I have taken two readings, one philosophic and one literary.

Theorist J.L. Austin and performance poet David Antin share a radical antipathy to metalanguage. While a statement—Austin's "constative"—assumes a kernel of truth "about" which the statement forms and an outside position from which to fold the statement around its truth, both Austin's "performative" utterance and Antin's idea of performance assume that there is only *one* position to occupy—the single plane of the linguistic act. The Austinian performative is not "about" something because, in Derrida's words, it "does not have its referent . . . outside of itself" (SEC 13); it grants no ground from which to view metalinguistic truths. As Antin puts it in *talking at the boundaries*, "you can only stand in the place where you're standing" (*tb* 61). This antipathy to metalanguage, perhaps characteristic of

performance, is often the subject of Austin's and Antin's enterprises; it finds expression in their interest in self-enclosed utterances. Barbara Johnson writes of Mallarmé's *La déclaration foraine* that it is "less about something than about being about" (63), and this holds true for Austin and for Antin as well. But their works are also, paradoxically, about the *impossibility* of being "about." Antin describes one of his own poems this way: "It's 'about' I say, but it's not 'about'" ("A Correspondence with the Editors," 624). The result of this radically performative position is to show where assumptions of metalanguage come from in the first place: they are not so much the *a priori* inventions of philosophers as effects of language itself. Although there is nothing outside performance, each performance is compelled to suggest that there is, for only this suggestion allows performance to remain available to perception. The most performative language creates the effect of metalanguage elsewhere in the moment it takes its own, antimetalinguistic position. On the other hand, that position calls attention to the effect and to the contradiction. Thus, the role of the performative is to reveal the fictive and phenomenal nature both of itself and of the metalanguage it suggests. Austin shows this by making his performative figure disappear against an equally performative ground; Antin, by using the paradox of performance that evokes the meta-performative and vice-versa. Although Antin is right to claim that his poems are not "about," they must also, as Antin implies, *say* that they *are* "about." Both halves of this equation do not always carry the symbolic freight with which critical discussion is accustomed to burden them, but involve themselves in more paradoxical and richer configurations.

Austin's Process of Self-Elimination

In *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse*, Mary Louise Pratt observes that H.P. Grice's "polemical interest" lies in

stating the case for ordinary language vis-a-vis the so-called "language of science" [formal logic] . . . Obviously, his argument is intended to refute the philosophical position (commonly associated with Bertrand Russell) . . . that "the proper course is to conceive and begin to construct an ideal language." (128)²

The canonical interpretation of Austin likewise assumes, although it does not always emphasize, that resistance to metalanguage directs the logic of *How to Do Things with Words* (meaning, again, not that Austin never uses language to discuss language, but that he never orders these languages into

meaningful tiers). This logic is an artful one, the narrative of a *via negativa* unfolded in Austin's careful demonstration of the impossibility of alternative pseudologics.

Derrida, Johnson, and Stanley Fish³ argue that Austin lapses—either periodically or eventually—into an acceptance of intention and, implicitly, of the possibility of metalanguage. These readings register the plot of *How to Do Things with Words*, but do not follow its rhetoric. Austin's lectures are as much performances as Antin's talks (and also, like Antin's poems, printed from transcriptions and records).⁴ Austin's continuous but variably expressed opposition to metalanguage becomes clear if we study *How to Do Things with Words* from the perspective of the constative rather than the performative utterance. All of Austin's apparent attempts to isolate performatives from constatives are also, inevitably, attempts to isolate constatives themselves. Austin defines the constative utterance as a true or false descriptive statement; he opens *How to Do Things with Words* by noting in a discussion of "statements" that since "not all true or false statements are descriptions . . . I prefer to use the word 'Constative'" (HD 3). The existence or nonexistence of the constative is significant because it is *statement* specifically, as Austin sees it, that expresses determinations of truth. G.J. Warnock points out that in the essay "Truth" (*Philosophical Papers*) Austin "asks: 'When is a statement not a statement?' And answers: 'When it is a formula in a calculus'" (Warnock 59). Austin merely concurs here in the common view that when there is no possibility of falseness it is not meaningful to call something "true." A "statement" here corresponds linguistically to a Wittgensteinian "fact," which must have been able to be otherwise in order to count as a fact.⁵ As Warnock concludes, Austin holds

that there is a central, fundamental, "classic" case of language-use in which something is affirmed about "the world" or some part or region or constituent of "the world"; this gives us the central, fundamental, "classic" case of *statement*; and what it is for statements of that sort to be *true* gives us the central, fundamental, "classic" concept of truth. (Warnock 60)

It takes no genius to catch the resemblance between "statement" as it appears in such a passage, the "constative utterance" as it appears in *How to Do Things with Words*, and philosophical propositions as such. Philosophy itself—as opposed to mathematics on the one side or art on the other—is the province of the statement, so described. Austin does not make an explicit claim about propositions; then too, the proximity of descriptive sentences or statements to propositions is debatable, and it is possible to define "proposition" specifically to exclude some or all ordinary sentences.⁶ Still, Austin's point is alarming because it is suggestively indefinite,

and because the nonexistence of pure constative utterances would *a fortiori* make it at least complicated and difficult to establish the possibility of a reliable philosophic metalanguage. Warnock observes the overlap between Austin's "statement" and "proposition":

No doubt . . . many philosophers prefer the term of art "proposition." But Austin notes, correctly, that there is another philosophical use of "proposition" to mean "what a sentence means" He finds "statement" *less* objectionable than "proposition." (156)

If we ask "Less objectionable for what?" we find ourselves answering "Less objectionable for *the same purposes*." Austin's interpreters are very aware of the danger in which his uneasy overlap between the terms "constative utterance," "statement," and "proposition" places philosophic propositions. P.F. Strawson devotes considerable energy to arguing that "It scarcely seems . . . that we have, in [Austin's] points about the term 'statement', a reason for scepticism about the theory of propositions" (63).⁷ J.R. Searle, similarly, makes a distinction between acts of stating propositions and "statement-objects" (what is stated) in the hope of showing that Austin's objections to the truth value of statements really apply only to "statement-acts" (159).⁸ Austin threatens propositions on the first page of *How to Do Things with Words*, when he asserts that descriptive statements are inextricable from philosophy's "too long" concentration on the true/false axis (HD 1). Indeed, having named the constative utterance one of the proper would-be expressions of philosophic truth, Austin invents the performative utterance in order to have something to oppose to the pursuit of such truth.⁹

Few would deny that Austin's opposition to metalanguage involves these stakes. Austin formulates the performative as a possibility, however, only to dramatize the difficulty of defining it; the purpose of this dramatization has been far less clear to Austin's readers, yet seeking this purpose leads to the significance of Austin's rejection of metalanguage itself. Late in *How to Do Things with Words* Austin identifies performative utterances by their lexical tags (their literally including words like "affirm," "deny," "agree," etc.). Most of the lectures, however, attack the problem of defining performatives by eliminating would-be nonperformative types of language in order to find a performative remainder. This is mostly, but not solely, a matter of excluding constative language, for a fundamental asymmetry arises here. While truth and falsity apply only to statements and statements can only be true or false, the "nonperformative" turns out to be a larger category than the "true." By the same logic that

Austin uses in his essay on "Truth," there is a language below true or false statement. In "Truth" this was the language of value judgment or of taste; in *How to Do Things with Words* it is the nonreferential language of poetry. While descriptive statement encourages the possibility of metalanguage by its capacity to grasp and arrange detail, and a performative utterance shares this grasp without being true or false, poetry drops even lower, as though to become not a metalanguage, but a sublanguage similarly external. A descriptive language that makes a metalinguistic claim and a nonreferential language that, making no descriptive claim at all, can only function as an object language, aspire similarly to a kind of invulnerability. Both are languages that seek, from the inside, the boundary of language, pressing toward pure reason and toward the object world respectively. For the time being, these extralinguistic impulses define the performative negatively, as whatever escapes them.

Austin's resolve to exclude the imperviousness of *nonreferential* language makes sense of his notorious assertion that "a performative utterance will . . . 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" (HD 22). In Barbara Johnson's view, Austin's dismissal of literature is connected to his attempt, fairly late in *How to Do Things with Words*, apparently to secure the performative utterance by attaching to it "explicit" verbal markers.¹⁰ "One of the main motives behind the explicitation of a performative expression," Johnson suggests, is Austin's desire to end equivocation. Since poetic language equivocates, "it is not only equivocation that is ruled out by Austin's discussion of performative utterances; it is nothing less than poetry itself" (59). In other words, Johnson's Austin abolishes poetry because he wants to abolish ambiguity. But while it's true that Austin says that "The explicit performative rules out equivocation" (HD 76), he also says that "Language as such . . . is not precise" (HD 73). Stanley Cavell asserts that

The literary profession takes it—so far—that ordinary language is contrasted in Austin with *literary* language, whereas its contrast and contest is with words as they appear in *philosophy* (if you can spot that). (321)

In fact, Austin does oppose performative to philosophic language; but for *complementary* reasons, he must oppose it to poetic language. Poetry aims for a language as external to ordinary language as philosophy's; because it affirms nothing, poetry cannot be true, in the same sense in which the formula in calculus cannot be *false* (and therefore cannot be true either). Austin has no intolerance for equivocation. Rather, his desire to *rule out ruling it out*—his unequivocal dismissal of language that would dismiss

equivocation—rules out poetry. At some points Austin's assumption seems to be that the performative utterance can slip between statements and nonreferential utterances because it is self-referential—a peculiar status that alters what it means to refer, or to be referred to (we will have to return to this later). Again, the performative is to remain when Austin subtracts what he sees as impermeable kinds of language from the sum of speech acts. But when Austin subtracts would-be less than true or false (poetic) utterances and would-be metalinguistic true or false (constative) utterances from language, nothing remains. It is not only poetry that is ruled out by Austin's discussion of performative utterances; it is nothing less than *language*. This finding is sensical when one turns it around: a performative utterance that is not also constative (and therefore protometalinguistic) does not exist within language.

The impossibility of finding language that fits Austin's performative ideal means that one cannot set "performance" up outside statement. Yet this does not at all end Austin's resistance to metalanguage. Rather, this very impossibility has from the beginning formed the basis of another line of attack, in which the fictitiousness of the performative utterance confirms the equally fictive nature of the constative, its double and brother.

"The Only Actual Phenomenon"

Austin's second line of attack upon metalanguage has sometimes been overlooked.¹¹ Discussions of Austin's treatment of intention illustrate this (intention often serves as internal highlighting in critical readings of Austin's text—fluorescent dye in the arteries of Austin's argument). One would expect Austin to bracket intentionality, for—by a logic that Knapp and Michaels, among other heirs, inherit—intention posits a meaning exterior or prior to the speech act. Intentionality also assumes truth value, since an intentional utterance is, in Austin's words,

(merely) the outward and visible sign, for convenience or other record or for information, of an inward and spiritual act: from which it is but a short step to go on to believe or to assume without realizing that for many purposes the outward utterance is a description, *true or false*, of the occurrence [sic] of the inward experience. (HD 9)

The portions of *How to Do Things with Words* in which Austin maintains the distinction between performatives and constatives properly downplay intention; the performative depends on "felicity" rather than truth, convention rather than sincerity, for "we do not speak of a false bet or a false

christening," even if the required "intention is absent" (HD 11). It therefore seems like a confirmation of failure when, later, Austin gives up the idea of the distinct performative utterance and his caution about intention also disappears.¹² We find Austin arguing that there is only "a right or proper thing to say . . . for these purposes and with these intentions" (HD 145). Austin intensifies his implication of a level of increased truth outside the utterance by imagining a hypothetical total intentional context, a hermeneutic arena in which the speech act would become fully comprehensible: "The total speech act in the total speech situation is the *only actual* phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating" (HD 147). Derrida locates here, in Austin's intentionality, his fall into philosophy, in the moment when

performative communication becomes once more the communication of an intentional meaning, even if that meaning has no referent in the form of a thing or of a prior or exterior state of things. (SEC 14)

The "conscious and intentional presence" of the speakers "in the totality of [Austin's] operation, implies teleologically that no residue [*reste*] escapes the present totalization" (SEC 14).

In *How to Do Things with Words*, however, totality—either positive or, as in the disappearance of the pure performative, negative—spells the presence of fiction. As in Adorno's paraphrase of Hegel, "The whole is the false" (50). Austin's total intentionality, his insistence on an absolute context, excludes metalanguage as well as his former bracketing of intention did. Actually Austin's attitude toward intention has not changed. He never says that intentions are not present in performative utterances; he only says that when their intentions are not "proper" we do not speak of falsity but of infelicity. In fact, for Austin's purposes intention *has* to be "total," utterly saturating, in the same sense that intention saturates meaning for Knapp and Michaels. As Derrida notes, "a context is never absolutely determinable" (SEC 3). Austin's "total speech situation" requires that context, being "total," have no boundaries; but if there are no boundaries, there is no way to distinguish context from event. This is the point that Derrida makes against Austin, yet there is a way of reading this point within Austin himself. The very sentence in which he grants absolute determinability, for example, can also be read as denying it. When Wallace Stevens writes that "One must have a mind of winter" to behold "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is," we can't be sure he is not saying that "mind" and "winter" are mutually exclusive—that one can never behold the nothing that is. When Austin says "the total speech situation is the *only actual*

phenomenon which . . . we are engaged in elucidating," he may be saying, "We are engaged in elucidating no actual phenomenon." A similar logic of elimination is suggested, as noted earlier, by Austin's saying within the same three pages both that "The explicit performative rules out equivocation" (*HD* 76) and "Language as such . . . is not precise" (*HD* 73). If the speech *situation* is total, there is nothing outside it and no implication of metalanguage: a "total speech situation" is one with no context at all. At the same time, there is no distinguishable event. For Austin, this is an acceptable solution; he cheerfully releases the once-distinct performative act into this boundlessness.¹³ This is not surprising, since he has no stake in the performative as such—he wants it only as an alternative to the constative's future hopes of possible metalanguage. Notice that the resistance to metalanguage is here entirely negative; all concrete forms of this resistance are either heuristically fictive or, as in the case of poetry, as full of extralinguistic illusion as the concept of metalanguage itself. What happens if we try to state the nonexistence of metalanguage positively? This is David Antin's task as a performance artist interested in Austinian questions. Antin holds to a notion of unlimited event that resembles Austin's; for Antin as a performer, however, the disappearance of the performative figure into an equally performative ground is professionally dangerous.

Context is Event, Event Context

Antin mirrors Austin well, for he trained as a linguist, and his performances often consider performativity as explicitly as Austin's lectures; like Austin's, his work shows a pervasive affinity to Wittgenstein's.¹⁴ Antin's talk-poems show how hard it is to assert that one can occupy only the single plane of performance and at the same time render that plane perceptible to consciousness. Antin begins where Austin ends, with the idea that performance takes up the entire horizon. Antin's performances consist of extemporized speeches, later transcribed, revised, and published. "Talking," the substance of Antin's performances, is also his figure for performance in general. "Talking," in this figurative sense, can occur in writing or in thought. "Talking is not always spoken," Antin writes (*tb* 5); memory means saying to yourself that something happened (*tb* 15), and forgetting means "not answering" (*tb* 10).¹⁵ By making talking a figure for performance even while declaring it consistent with thought, Antin pulls performance into the private mental field usually occupied by intention. At the same time, Antin's performance retains the sphere of actions ("experi-

ences" or "events"). Antin thus extends "talking" and performance in two directions (internal and external) so that it is all-encompassing—not "about" something, because, like Austin's "total speech situation," it excludes nothing.

The omnipresence of performance only needs demonstration because it is obscured by a perceptual frame Antin calls the "preparational state," an "inability to take things seriously this strange sense that you cant take seriously anything that is at hand" (*tb* 45). The preparational state projects an event for which the present moment seems merely to rehearse, and thereby inhibits our recognition of the present as an event, experience, or performance in its own right:

there are a lot of things in life that are not experiences you dont regard them as experiences you go through them and you say "that wasnt an experience that wasnt an experience that wasnt an experience that was an experience!" (*tb* 31).¹⁶

An event's presence to perception, in other words, depends on a falsely qualitative standard. If an event is to appear to consciousness, we need it to seem to *deserve* to be present.

Antin's talk-poem, "*is this the right place?*," delivered at the Moore College of Art in Philadelphia in 1973, attempts to loosen the mental grip of the preparational state by showing that all preparations can be seen as performances. In this poem "place"—the spatial equivalent of "event"—functions as a figure for felt experience, or performance. Antin illustrates the search for place or event in a series of anecdotes: of a medical center in southern California, of the sort that "get set up as speculations about the future population that will come" (*tb* 35), and the young dentist there who "had a terrifically prepared life and . . . was waiting for it to begin" (*tb* 36); of Antin's sense as a student that "well written novels are always written in the right words" (*tb* 38) much as lives must always be lived in the right place, "the way flaubert made life the way flaubert made love" (*tb* 42); of a student painter who "was going to make paintings of the right sort" (*tb* 38) in contrast to another who said "'these are my paintings'" (*tb* 39), and so on. Everything the poem mentions—travel, art, academic and non-academic education, even Antin's story of his airplane flight to Philadelphia to deliver the talk—shows that preparation is performance. For the very reason that Antin's plane, for instance, is en route *to* the performance, it becomes a metaphor for the power of performance to make a place out of being en route. The plane is a place whose existence as such is hidden, just because we suppose that a place cannot also be a vehicle; but

"is this the right place?" shows that vehicles are stations and stations, vehicles. It is entirely appropriate not only to ask "what place is this?" and "is this a right place?," but "where am i going in this right place?" (tb 29). Useful as this conclusion is to Antin ideationally, it is the source of his problem in elaborating the basis of his own aesthetic perceptibility.

Antin's "Continuous Roll"

Antin rightly observes that the visibility of an event is "an art question as much as a life question" (tb 31); it is, more precisely, a formal question. Genres such as the talk-poem, which rhetorically emphasize their consanguinity with ordinary life, are always in danger of becoming convincingly invisible. Poetic formalism solves the problem of defining the aesthetic event by making aesthetic features appear and disappear in relation to pre-established norms. This idea of standard and deviation is the aesthetic correlative of the "preparational state"; the formalist artist uses arbitrary frames to create an apparently qualitative context for perception. The occupation of the formalist resembles Antin's "very good job working as an engineer in a bubble gum factory" (tb 43):

there we were in this bubble gum factory trying to determine how it was that a child who paid a penny for bubble gum would get both parts of the joke and they would prove to be the right parts so that if it would say in the first frame "why did the chicken cross the road?" it should say in the second "to get to the other side" as opposed say to the child opening up his one cent bubble gum and it saying "to get to the other side who was that lady i saw you with last night?" because the strip came off a continuous roll (tb 43)

Antin's description of the bubble-gum factory is clearly literary, since it echoes his discussion, in an earlier essay, of Randall Jarrell.¹⁷ The comic strip-cutter slices what passes for coherence from what is actually a "continuous roll"; Jarrell's poems seem similarly "pseudonarrative." Jarrell's epigraph to *Little Friend, Little Friend* (1945), Antin writes, is "the only poem [in the book] that isn't smothered in framing devices The only reason that Jarrell didn't frame this piece was that he didn't think of it as a poem" ("Modernism and Postmodernism" 109). Like the comic machine, Jarrell is "obsessed with the necessity for framing at the same time that he is always tempted by his vision of the arbitrary" ("Modernism and Postmodernism" 108). Although Antin remarks that the bubble-gum factory "was not part of [his] preparation" for an artistic career, but "subsidiary and accidental" (tb 43), the factory does prepare Antin's career as a performance poet—a poet

precisely of the subsidiary and accidental—for it reveals the illusionistic machinery of form. Unlike Jarrell, Antin wants “a continuous roll” of performance.¹⁸ His notion of form attempts to divest itself of both inner and outer borders:

I thought I would strip my poetry of every characteristic that could be taken as a formal consideration and that, regardless of that, the work would be as formal or as nonformal as any work that set out on the path to pure form... Then the whole idea of “form” fell apart for me. There was absolutely nothing there to reject. (“Correspondence” 628)

Closure, above all, endangers Antin’s idea of limitless performance. Intention places meaning before the event, assuming preparational thought; closure creates the sensation of a frame, and acts as the complement of intention. Antin excludes intention by excluding preparational thought, but intention, locked out of its conventional position prior to performance, runs around to the back door and reappears as closural meaning. Antin addresses the threat of closure in his anxious (and closing) story of a friend, John Molle, who died at the age of nineteen. Molle’s death metaphorizes the end of performance in utter stasis. At their last meeting, Molle talks about another ending—orgasm, the end of “the real experience of masturbation” (*tb* 47):

he said “no one has ever described the subtle transformation of feeling
 . . . from a gentle aura where its always still possible to turn back
 with a flush of pleasure to a fierce and growing concentration pointed by
 the intense and systematic stroking by the fingers of the distended and
 trembling crown then the release” (*tb* 47)

Now, for Antin the stock marker of arbitrary literary closure is epiphany. In a college creative writing class, for example, “there was no one who didnt know what a story was because a story had an ‘epiphany’” (*tb* 37). Antin’s favorite figure for epiphany is orgasm, and the literature that produces that orgasm is part and parcel of the “preparational state”: “The taste for the ironic, moral poem,” Antin writes, “is a taste for a kind of pornography . . . a fantasy of controlled intensity, and like all pornography . . . thoroughly mechanical” (“Modernism and Postmodernism” 120). Allen Tate, by this logic, assigns to his reader “the pathetic hope of a virgin for an experienced lover whose competence (detachment) is sufficient to lead her to an orgasm, and all to be achieved by mere maintenance of a regular rhythm” (*ibid.* 117). Antin associates orgasm, in turn, with arrival at a place:

one of the main things about pornography is that its involved with finding the right place with preparations and litanies . . . the recitation itself becomes a kind of incantation in order to arrive at some place which is in fact calling "coming" (tb 48)

How, then, can Antin resist the tendency of performance towards orgasmic closure, a closure that would wrongly imply what Antin does not want it to—that performance has an outside? It becomes urgent to ensure that each performance leads visibly to another, that each station function as a vehicle. Antin has said that preparation obscures performance; it has been in this the accomplice of manipulative intentionality. But now only *continual* preparation—the renunciation of epiphany or orgasm—can stave off closure, which threatens performance from the other side. If it is necessary to see each preparation as a performance, it is equally necessary to see each performance as a preparation; if there is merely a preparational state of mind that occludes our awareness of ceaseless performance, there is also merely a performative state of mind that occludes our awareness of ceaseless preparation.¹⁹ All that seems to be preparation implies something outside performance, yet all that seems to be preparation can also be seen as performance itself. There is no basis for the visibility of performance except its own strategic self-concealment. Antin's performance cannot afford to appear as limitless as it says it is, because a total performative situation is no performance at all; it is a "continuous roll" in which there is neither preparation nor performance. Performance, then, itself fictive, suggests its own false limit, then points out the falsity of what it has just suggested. This oscillation characterizes performance and makes it perceptible as such. This characterization also suggests a critique of the critique of metalanguage since it is no longer clear what an idea like Antin's "experience" is resisting. Although such a term usefully exposes the illusory quality of "preparation," the immediacy it evokes in order to do so is not only similarly illusory, but similarly extralinguistic.

Performative Paradoxes

I need to return now to the self-enclosed or self-referential utterance; what can it tell us as a model of performativity, and what can it reveal about the concept of metalanguage that it seems to tax? Derrida suggests that the special status of Austin's performative lies in its self-enclosure: "the performative does not have its referent (*but here that word is certainly no longer appropriate, and this is precisely the interest of the discovery*), outside of

itself" (SEC 13; italics mine). We can see how the self-enclosed utterance (and by extension, the performative) transforms the notion of reference by examining its well-known subset—the self-enclosed, self-contradictory utterance ("I am lying"), or Liar Paradox.²⁰ In the paradox, the claim "(S) There is a sentence that says of itself only that it is not true" appears incompatible with the claim "(T) Any sentence is true if, and only if, what it says is the case" (Martin 1). In one formulation,

The incompatibility of (S) and (T) is argued as follows:

Suppose (S) is true, and let *s* be any such sentence. Then *s* cannot be true, for, since *s* says that it is not true, if it were true it would not be true (by (T)). But since *s* is not true, and since that, and only that, is what *s* says, then (by (T)) *s* is true. (Martin 2)

The conclusion of "*is this the right place?*," to return to my own example, resolves Antin's closural dilemma into the paradox:

now i might say of this particular discourse that theres no place at
which i can end it without producing a kind of profoundly porno-
graphic poetic effect which i assure you i can do i could produce a
vast symphonic conclusion and you might walk out feeling benefited
[sic] but i wont do it (tb 49)

"i wont do it" is self-contradictory here because given Antin's hostility to framing, closure, and epiphany throughout the poem, "i wont do it" is, in the grandeur of its negation, of all possible endings the one that most *completely* "does it," that most epiphantically frames and closes the poem. It seems at first that Antin has got things stunningly wrong. Yet semantic paradox is "a concept whose form and content are at odds" (Irwin 10), and its maximal friction between form and content may mark a point of maximal revolt against the possibility of metalanguage. Philosophical literature on the subject assumes this resistance, taking semantic paradox precisely as a criticism of the adequacy of the philosophic conception of metalanguage. A sizable part of the philosophic literature therefore responds to the paradoxes by striving to create more precisely formalized, would-be foolproof metalanguages (or, more casually, by employing ideas of "use" and "mention").²¹ Tarski's (1936) response to this sort of antinomy is still the classical model for this approach: acknowledging that formalized languages cannot make determinations about their own truth, Tarski concludes that it is necessary to create a hierarchy of languages, each with its own "truth" capable of comprehending the separate "truth" of the one before it.²²

Slavoj Žižek argues the anti-metalinguistic nature of self-reference, citing a paradox in Lacan's *Seminars*:

In *Seminar XI* [Lacan] begins one of his sentences: "But this is precisely what I want to say and what I am saying—because what I want to say is what I am saying . . ." ²³ In a post-structuralist reading . . . Is Lacan not proceeding as if his own text is exempt from the gap between what is said and what he intends to say? . . . In the Lacanian perspective it is, on the contrary, precisely such "impossible" utterances—utterances following the logic of the paradox "I am lying"—which keep the fundamental gap of the signifying process open and in this way prevent us from assuming a metalanguage position. (155-56)

By juxtaposing two examples that are not parallel, Žižek rightly extends the logic of the Liar Paradox to self-enclosed utterances generally. "I am lying" is self-enclosed and self-contradictory, while "what I want to say is what I am saying" is self-enclosed and smoothly circular. Žižek's alignment of the two types affirms that Lacan's circularity is "precisely . . . 'impossible'"—on a footing with the self-contradictory "I am lying." The two types of self-enclosed utterance themselves close the ends of a circle: "what I want to say is what I am saying" contains the *minimum* degree of friction between form and reference, and is therefore the obverse of the paradox. Now, self-enclosure of Lacan's type is expressly characteristic of Antin's principle of performance ("you can only stand in the place where you're standing" [*tb* 61]) and of Austin's performative utterance ("I now pronounce thee . . ." [pronouncing thee]). The self-enclosed utterance, self-contradictory or not, is the homomorph of the performative. As commentary, such an utterance has a point of purchase, but nothing to grasp; it is Archimedean, but in a void. In other words, there is no metalanguage here because *there is no object language*. At the same time, self-enclosed utterances are literally miniature pieces of metalanguage, shaped like Möbius strips.

Derrida draws a similar doubleness from Ponge's *Fable*, "a sort of poetic performative that simultaneously describes and carries out, on the same line, its own generation" ("Psyche" 33). Ponge's poem begins, "*Par le mot par commence donc ce texte / Dont la première ligne dit le vérité*" [By the word *by* commences then this text / Of which the first line speaks the truth]:

Its first line speaks only of itself, it is immediately metalingual, but its metalanguage has nothing to set it off; it is an inevitable and impossible metalanguage since *there is no language before it*, since it has no prior object beneath or outside itself . . . There is no metalanguage, the first line repeats; there is only that, says the echo, or Narcissus. ("Psyche" 34)

Antin's perception that vehicles toward stations do themselves qualify as stations parallels the way in which, in Ponge's sentence, it is possible for the *referent* to do the referring and at the same time to remain the object of reference. This referring referent gives the illusion of change, like one of Wittgenstein's schematic geometric figures. Within the self-enclosed utterance, positions of reference are revealed to be phenomenal, born in the eye of Wittgenstein's beholder: "Now I see it as a" goes with 'I am trying to see it as a'" (*Philosophical Investigations*, 206). The self-enclosed utterance is like a cloud chamber in which one can see this ephemeral substitutability in its most condensed form. Phantasmal relations of figure and ground within the self-enclosed (performative) utterance are repeated outside it, in relations between performatives and the equally spectral metalanguage they evoke. As soon as "there can hardly be any longer a possibility of not seeing that stating is performing an act" (*HD* 139), neither is there a possibility of not seeing that performatives cannot be isolated from statements; if the Austinian performative is not about something because it "does not have its referent . . . outside of itself" (*SEC* 13), neither is it *not* about something, since it does not have its *signifier* outside of itself.

A similar phenomenality appears on the formal level. Antin rejects right and left justified margins, punctuation, capital letters, and paragraphing because "if i put it in paragraphs . . . it would look truer" (*tb* 80). But this recourse to the phenomenal means that Antin's lack of paragraphing, also, gives only the *appearance* of a lack of authority. Such terms produce each other; if one is removed, the other fills the ground, but loses its own identity. More important, the flawless substitutability of the terms reveals their fictive nature. The argument that each human utterance (for Austin) or action (for Antin), no matter how inconsequential, is a performance, is logically consistent, but only spectrally; moreover, it is rhetorically insupportable. We can't perform an ordinary action and at the same time call attention to the performance without seeming for the moment to stand outside it in a less performative place. Yet we need to do this, since a performance must make itself visible. Thus, the one thing the radically performative position cannot do is *perform* its argument. Here resistance to metalanguage lucidly mirrors the extralinguistic ambitions of metalanguage itself. If metalanguage would avoid the difficulty of language's making determinations about its own truth by forever deferring the determination to an upper level, the self-enclosed utterance that makes this deferral impossible makes the truth determination immediately—and immediately empty. The self-referential elimination of metalanguage actually limits equivocation, for it produces a fixed oscillation.

Antin's "It's 'about' I say, but it's not 'about'" shows this concisely. Since Antin's language can only perform in the place where it is performing, it is not "about"; but as soon as it also *says* it performs, it says (arbitrarily) that it is "about." As soon as Antin says "I say," whatever he says seems to be "about something"; if he says "it's not 'about,'" he seems to be talking *about* not talking "about."²⁴ The radically performative position cannot perform itself because its dependence on rhetoric makes it lie about itself. Yet this does not mean that it cannot criticize the hypothetical purchase of philosophic metalanguage. Austin uses the very "failure" of the strict performative in his polemical interest. "Ills that have been found to afflict statements can be precisely paralleled with ills that are characteristic of performative utterances"; therefore, Austin claims, "There seems no reason why stating should be given a specially unique position" (*Philosophical Papers* 249). But the discrepancy between the radically performative position and the rhetoric that must represent it also tells us what de Man learned from Nietzsche, that "the possibility for language to perform is just as fictional as the possibility for language to assert" (27). At a time when it seems easy to see that there is no philosophic metalanguage, this harder truth, the fictive character of performative language, is one we should keep in view.

Conclusion

Finally, attempts at metalanguage, desiring as they may to evade equivocation, ensure its return.²⁵ Metalanguage, the alleged instrument of stability, produces a mirror image of the infinite regression so repellent to some empirical and dialectical thinkers—the *mise en abîme* assumed to be the province of skeptics. Fredric Jameson takes note of this in 1972, at the end of *The Prison-House of Language*, when he criticizes the "peculiar regressive structure of the concept of metalanguage" which he believes to be characteristic of structuralism (209). While metalanguage is usually thought of as hypothetical, it seems to Jameson that structuralists actually have nothing but metalanguage: "They all, in one way or another, conceive of themselves as evolving commentaries on some more basic object language which is never given" (209). Jameson perceives, in other words, that this orientation toward metalanguage is infinitely textual and linguistic rather than would-be extralinguistic. The only thing that is amiss here is Jameson's pejorative tone. Similarly, all that is inaccurate in Tarski's solution (for example) is its complacency. Barthes's *The Fashion System*, how-

ever, quoted by Jameson here, is sensitive to the psychology of the situation. Barthes is not, as Jameson suggests, “embarrasse[d]” by infinite regression, but rather intimately immersed in it, recognizing it as the medium in which he moves:

when he speaks of the rhetorical signified in his own metalanguage, the analyst inaugurates (or reassumes) an infinite type of knowledge-system: for should it happen for someone (someone else, or himself later on) to undertake an analysis of his writing . . . it would be necessary for this someone to have recourse to a new metalanguage, which would in his turn expose him This is a necessity which Structuralism precisely attempts to understand, that is to say, to enunciate: the semiologist is he who expresses his future death in the very terms in which he has named and understood the world. (quoted in Jameson 208)

Barthes’s line of thought implicitly answers a question I asked at the beginning of this essay, the question of what—besides relatively familiar phenomena like objectivism and authority—the opposition to metalanguage so fiercely opposes. Anti-metalinguistic expressions attempt to lock out this Tarskian nightmare—a spiral that to Jameson seems “structurally incapable of evolving a theory of self-consciousness” (208)—by proposing that we needn’t live with such a monstrous answer because there is no question. It would be more accurate to say that we have to live with it, not half-consciously in the belief that it is a solution, but with open eyes and in the knowledge that it is a limit and a necessity that grounds our writing.

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ABBREVIATIONS USED

HD	Austin, <i>How to Do Things with Words</i>
tb	Antin, <i>talking at the boundaries</i>
SEC	Derrida, “Signature Event Context”

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NOTES

1. A metalanguage stands outside another language and remarks upon it from this vantage point; Fredric Jameson notes that "Barthean commentary," for example, "is metalanguage in that it abstracts the structure of an other more primary language . . . and makes it available in a new and different form" (159). This example suffices if we take seriously the idea that Barthes's commentary makes something "available." A metalinguistic statement is not just any use of language to comment on language, but one that claims that these uses form a hierarchy. Metalanguage must aim to surpass its object language in some respect—to know or to give more than the object language does. I will sometimes have occasion to refer to the "extralinguistic" impulse of metalanguage. I mean by this that while a metalanguage would fashion itself out of language, it aims to have the advantages and not the disadvantages of its object language, and therefore to be as though extralinguistic.

2. The words in quotation marks belong to Grice. While an "ideal language" and "metalanguage" are not the same, they appear to share the same objectivist goals. By this logic, an ideal symbolic language would outdo metalanguage—one would no longer need to try to make metalinguistic philosophical statements out of words that occur in ordinary conversation.

3. See his "With the Compliments of the Author: Reflections on Austin and Derrida" *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1982), 693-721.

4. Austin's performative cunning is explicated by Shoshana Felman in *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with J.L. Austin*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983), especially 108-36. On the general inadequacy of the poststructuralist response to Austin, see Sandy Petrey, *Speech Acts and Literary Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).

5. "Any one [fact] can either be the case or not be the case, and everything else remain the same" (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden [London: Routledge, 1981]), p. 31. Austin asserts that when a determination is a mere value judgment, the word "true" is again inapplicable (*Philosophical Papers* 131; see Warnock 61). In the case of the formula we are dealing with something that is more than true; of the value judgment, with something less than true. Statements only *are* true or false.

6. Tyler Burge, in an article that considers the paradoxes produced by self-enclosed utterances like performatives, notes the attraction of the intuitive claim that paradoxical sentences do not "express a proposition or statement," and that a "precise sense of 'proposition'" is necessary to these claims (96-97).

7. Strawson proposes that "we might take these points, rather, as reasons for viewing with favour the employment of the artificial term 'proposition'" (63).

8. See also L.W. Ferguson's response, "Locutionary and Illocutionary Acts," in *Essays on J.L. Austin* (Oxford UP, 1973).

9. Austin leaves no doubt that the performative/constative distinction protects performatives from constatives and not the other way around. Austin refers to "the purity of performatives" (*HD* 149); in Lecture VII's assessment of explicitly performative verbs Austin remarks that it is "irritating" to have such apparently "quite satisfactory pure performatives . . . [sharing the sentence] with what look like 'statements', true or false" (*HD* 86). Austin's summary narrative of the failure of the separation between performatives and constatives emphasizes throughout that things are "not so bad" as long as some performative uniqueness remains perceptible (*HD* 90). Of course, the "Austin" who makes these pronouncements is no closer to J.L. Austin of

Oxford than the Dante who faints in the *Inferno* is Dante Alighieri, and we should read them accordingly.

10. "We shall *have to revert* to the notion of the explicit performative . . . *Because* we suggested that the performative is not altogether so obviously distinct from the constative . . . we were considering how to define the performative more clearly" (*HD* 66-67; italics mine).

11. On Austin's "'despair' of performatives" and reactions to it, see L.W. Forgonson, "In Pursuit of Performatives," in *Symposium on J.L. Austin*, ed. K.T. Fann (London: Routledge, 1969) 412-19.

12. Strawson gives a sensitive account of the relation between convention and intention in *How to Do Things with Words* in "Intention and Convention in Speech Acts," in *Logico-Linguistic Papers* (London: Methuen, 1971), 149-69, especially 165-69.

13. In this sense *How to Do Things with Words* is, as Fish has called it, a self-consuming text whose "true structure is its gradual dissolution" (720).

14. See especially "The Black Plague," Parts III-IV, in Antin's *Selected Poems*.

15. Socrates proposes in the *Theaetetus* that "when the mind is thinking, it is simply talking to itself, asking questions and answering them" (Plato 895). Antin modestly compares himself to Socrates (see *ib* 1, 52-53).

16. Cavell notes that ordinary language philosophy restores to perception the significance or eventfulness of linguistic events, against "our agreement that what happens to us is inherently trivial, that we live as if our daily experience were not ours, or just because ours, of no general significance" (317).

17. Antin tells a version of this story even earlier, in "Autobiography" (1967):

the problem was to make sure you had the right two frames . . . For this there was a braking device, an electric eye, a dipole motor with a chain drive correcting the spindle speed, a German physicist who didn't speak English, an engineer assistant who did and an inspecting committee in white coats—The device perfected we assembled about the machine, gum was fed into the feed rack, the machine turned on and a piece of gum caught in the gears. The physicist leaned over the machine to pry the gum loose with his screwdriver but neglected to shut off the motor. Gears chewing up the screwdriver, spitting out teeth and spindle pins, the machine coming to a grinding halt. Der Herr Doktor was inconsolable shaking his head repeating—"Ach, mein Schraubenzieher, mein Schraubenzieher!" (*Selected Poems* 111-12)

18. Antin has said he wants "nothing less than a paradigm of the working of the mind at some real thing" ("A Correspondence with the Editors," 600). In this he resembles other postmodern poets such as Ashbery and Cage, who are attracted to projects of total inclusion. See Marjorie Perloff, "'No More Margins': John Cage, David Antin, and the Poetry of Performance," in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981), 303-04, 334-35.

19. Antin's precursor in circulatory art is Stevens, whose "the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined" (*Collected Poems* 503) provides only a moment's relief. In the next moment one realizes that one must also imagine that the absence of the imagination had itself to be imagined, and so on, endlessly. Stevens's "had" then takes on an ominous air of obligation.

20. The Liar Paradox finds a type theory correlative in Russell's Paradox:

Distinguishing between two kinds of classes (those that do not include themselves as members and those that do), Russell calls the first class "normal" and the second "non-normal" . . . By definition *the class of all normal classes* includes within itself all normal classes. Consequently, if it is itself a normal class, it must be included in itself. But self-inclusion is the distinguishing characteristic of a non-normal class. (Irwin 9-10)

In such instances, "the class of all normal classes is normal only if it is non-normal, and non-normal only if it is normal" (ibid. 10). On the relation between linguistic and nonlinguistic self-referential paradoxes, see Graham Priest, "The Structure of the Paradoxes of Self-Reference," *Mind* 103 (Jan. 1994) 25-34.

21. Much of the rest of the field is taken up with redefinitions of truth-value, its conditions, and its possible structures in order to show that some true-looking sentences are not, or not always, true. For a summary of responses see Martin, 1-8. For relatively sensible versions of the truth-value-oriented approach, see Brian Skyrms, "Return of the Liar: Three-Valued Logic and the Concept of Truth," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 7 (1970) 153-61, and "Notes on Quantification and Self-Reference," in *The Paradox of the Liar*, ed. Robert L. Martin (New Haven: Yale UP, 1970) 67-74. Graham Priest, in his remarkable book, *In Contradiction: A Study of the Transconsistent* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), contends that "there are true contradictions" or statements "of the form: a and it is not the case that a." Priest's term for a true contradiction, "dialetheia," is "meant to be indicative of the Janus-headed nature . . . of a true contradiction: if $\alpha \wedge \neg \alpha$ is a true contradiction, α 'faces' both truth and falsity" (4). As Priest observes, this position constitutes an "attack on the dominant logical theory of our times" (257).

22. "The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages," in *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics*, trans. J.H. Woodger (New York: Oxford UP, 1956). Tarski does not apply hierarchical logic to ordinary language, which in his view has no access to truth. It is a widely pervasive logic nonetheless. Hilary Putnam remarks that "It is precisely the aim of neopositivism," for example, "to view scientific theories as constructed in levels in such a way that the terms of one level may depend for their meaning on terms of a lower level but not vice versa" ("The Craving for Objectivity," *NHL* 15, Winter 1984, 236).

23. See Jacques Lacan, *Television*, trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson (New York: Norton, 1990) 3.

24. For philosophic definitions of "about," see Hilary Putnam, "Formalization of the Concept 'About,'" *Philosophy of Science* 25 (1958) 125-30, and Nelson Goodman, *Problems and Projects* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1982) 246-72.

25. See Culler, 124-25, 199