

Just Joking: Speech, Performance and Ethics

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ABSTRACT

Why do people go into rooms to watch other people speak? What is it that is taking place when a performer walks onto a stage, or steps up to a microphone, and, in the silence that has fallen, begins to speak? This thesis considers both the pleasures and the anxieties that attend such public acts of speaking, and responds in particular to the kinds of utterances that announce themselves as in some way 'non-serious'. It takes, as its founding example, comedian Stewart Lee saying, of *Top Gear* presenter Richard Hammond, 'I wish he had died in that crash', before adding, 'it's just a joke... like on *Top Gear*'. This, I suggest, is a complex moment that calls into play many of the key questions of performative theory, restaging them within the context of early twenty-first century Britain, where speech is mediatized and monetized as a form of entertainment.

Against this backdrop, the thesis draws on key works by Shoshana Felman and Judith Butler, to argue that the ethics that emerges from such an enquiry would be one based on our mutual, shared unknowingness about what our bodies 'say' when we stand up to speak. Crucially, this might also be an ethics responsive to a certain kind of funniness. This thesis examines performances that are attuned to this kind of funniness: the stand-up comedy of Stewart Lee; the philosophical performance of J.L. Austin; the postmodern theatricality of Kinkaleri, and the stalled conversations via which the practice of performance studies itself takes place. Acknowledging the rhetoric by which its own 'voice' is figured, this thesis both narrates and stages moments of confusion between bodies and figures, examples and jokes, theory and performance. It aims to discover how such confusions, and the pleasure and anxiety they induce, might become politically useful.

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INTRODUCTION

1. Scenes of address

This thesis asks what happens when a person stands on a stage and speaks. It centres on performances that emphasize the act of speech, the kinds of performances that begin when a performer walks onto a stage, or steps up to a microphone, and, in the silence that has fallen, begins to speak. It responds to performances that begin with, or consist entirely in, acts of speech addressed directly to an audience. Such performances might well begin with a 'good evening', might well involve an audience being addressed as 'ladies and gentlemen', and being told 'thanks for coming'. These sorts of utterances call attention to the situation of performance, to our shared presence in a particular place and time, either overtly or subtly: 'I'm glad to be here tonight', the performer might say, or 'now I'd like to say...'

By beginning thus, with the scene of live performance, I hope to lay the ground upon which broader questions about the scene of spoken address might be staged. What are our expectations of that scene? How are we to define its limits, the limits of our responsibility within it? How are we to reconcile the embodied act of speaking with the effects and consequences that reach beyond it? And why might it remain important to ask what it was that happened when that particular body spoke those particular words in that particular place and time? After all, in this age of digital communications, have we not moved somewhat beyond the idea that a person's physical presence is necessary for their act of speech to be received, understood, effective, of interest? Why then fixate upon this scene, the scene in which one a person, a lone individual, addresses a gathering of persons? Is this not an essentialist move, to return to the person standing there and saying things out loud, to imply that this constitutes speech 'as such'? Can a research project framed thus really hope to discover something about our contemporary relationship with speech and language more generally?

The word 'speech' carries the connotation of something more formal than an everyday conversation, and this is, in part, why I have chosen to frame my research interest using this term. 'A speech' is a public address, one associated with direct, front-facing presentation in the first person. Speech-making, in this sense, is associated with rhetoric. A term in use from ancient Greece to the present day, rhetoric in its original sense was public speaking for political purposes, or more precisely 'a technique of persuasion performed before the city council, the *demokratia*, the skill of convincing the *demos*'.¹ In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle sought to systematize the methods by which such an orator might seek to influence the mental state of his listeners. In this thesis, I engage with the idea of rhetoric, and more specifically with the idea of a 'rhetorical figure', a figure of speech, although I draw my understanding of these terms from more recent intellectual formations. According to Shannon Jackson, herself a Professor of Rhetoric and Theatre,² the 'theory explosion' in the academic humanities in the twentieth-century can be understood as 'a revival of the rhetorical in a new form'.³ Arguably one of the most influential texts of this 'new rhetoric' was Paul de Man's 'Semiotics and Rhetoric' (1973),⁴ an essay that has exerted a strong influence upon my work in this thesis. For her part, Jackson considers de Man's deconstructive take on rhetoric, alongside the work of Jacques Derrida, particularly in *De la Grammatologie* (1967),⁵ to have unhelpfully sidelined the oratorical dimension of rhetoric in favour of an emphasis on the textual. Certainly, it could be said that, after Derrida's thorough and persuasive critique of Western intellectual thought's metaphysical privileging of speech, declaring a research interest in 'speech' risks coming across as at best naïve, at worst, reductively essentializing.

¹ Vujanović, Ana 'Performative Rhetoric of/and Contemporary Performance', *Frakcija: Performing Arts Magazine*, 38/39 (2005), 12-25 (p. 13).

² Currently at the University of California, Berkeley.

³ Jackson, Shannon, *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 182.

⁴ Paul de Man 'Semiotics and Rhetoric' in *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 3-19 (first publ. in *Diacritics*, 3:3 (1973), 27-33).

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* (Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1967).

In response to such concerns, in the first instance, I assert that the *idea* of a person standing there, saying things out loud, in the presence of others, remains important to the way we *imagine* speech. This is an assertion that will be contextualized more thoroughly in due course. For now, I will turn to Jerry Seinfeld, who, as a stand-up comedian knows a thing or two about public speaking, and who puts it like this:

According to most studies, people's number one fear is public speaking. Number two is death. Death is number two. Does that sound right? This means to the average person, if you go to a funeral, you're better off in a casket than doing the eulogy.⁶

Whether or not 'most studies' would verify this, the fact that it *works* as a joke suggests there is something in it. Seinfeld's joke reflects the way in which the scene of public speaking is a locus not only of anxiety, but also of expectation, even hope. We *want* a public speech to be meaningful, moving, affirming, perhaps even transformative. And if it can't be all of these things, at the very least, a public speech could, in the course of undercutting our expectations of it, make us laugh, as Seinfeld seems to be reminding us. And yet, the widespread fear of public speaking suggests that, more often than not, speech fails to meet our expectations. If, in practice, our speech tends to be less moving, less affirming, less transformative and certainly less eloquent and witty than we would ideally wish it to be, then what kinds of expectations, hopes and anxieties are brought into play when we go to sit in rooms and *watch* people speak?

In the context of a performance, the kind of speaking that interests me here is referred to as 'direct address'. In the following section, I will consider the theatrical practice of direct address in a historical context. First, I wish to draw attention to the odd semantics of the phrase itself. In the simplest terms, the verb 'address' is to *direct* something toward another person, or thing. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word 'address' is originally a borrowing from French, *addresser*: 'to direct, guide, to make straight, to set up, to raise, to

⁶ Cited in K lina Gotman and Samuel Godin, 'It's My Show, Or, Shut Up and Laugh: Spheres of Intimacy in the Comic Arena and How New Technologies Play Their Part in the "Live" Act', in *The Laughing Stalk: Live Comedy and Its Audiences*, ed. by Judy Batalion (Anderson: Parlor Press, 2011), pp. 253-270 (p. 255).

stand up'.⁷ Already, within the etymology, some peculiar doubling-over is taking place (not to mention that highly suggestive inference of someone or something standing up, raised). Moreover, in many of its usages, both archaic and modern, the verb 'address' is all but synonymous with 'direct towards'. The etymology and semantics of *address* – that which is direct, has direction – reveals what it is that might feel a little bit funny about the phrase *direct address*. For, if an address is, by definition, always directed, then demarcating one kind of utterance as *direct address* seems odd, an anxious over-insistence. Perhaps this tells us something about the affective experience of being addressed in the conditions of a performance. 'Now I'd like to say...' says the performer, in a direct address that is oddly *redoubled*, as though the performer's act were saying, 'I am speaking to you, *and* I am *calling attention to the fact that* I am speaking to you'. Is this why it seems that there is something inherently funny about the body that stands on stage and, in the silence that has fallen, begins to speak? Is there some constitutive irony of a body performing its performance of speaking, a funniness that can be felt before, even, a word (let alone a joke) has been spoken?

2. Speech onstage

In *Talking to the Audience*, Bridget Escolme writes of a 'post-nineteenth century assumption about theatrical progress: that at some point around the turn of the sixteenth century, the unsophisticated relics of a performance practice that predates London's first designated theatre spaces begin to "develop" into "useful and more naturalistic" conventions of character representation'.⁸ Escolme cites Andrew Gurr's *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642*, an account of the Elizabethan theatre that considers the persistence of direct address – explanatory asides and prologues as well as soliloquies – in Shakespeare's otherwise very modern-seeming texts as rather unfortunate, even mildly embarrassing. As Gurr writes, 'Falstaff's catechism on honour is a

⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010).

⁸ Bridget Escolme, *Talking to the Audience: Shakespeare, Performance, Self* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 7.

relic of the clown's role of "interloquutions with the Audients"⁹.⁹ According to this teleological narrative, direct address, which is thought of as all too 'direct', character-breaking, implausible, is gradually eradicated as subtler and more sophisticated modes of theatrical exposition take hold. In naturalistic theatre, actors do not address the audience directly, but pretend to be people having a conversation in a bounded fictional world. The spectators are not acknowledged directly; rather, they are permitted, as it were, to *overhear*. Direct address has no place in this more serious kind of theatre. It is, as Gurr's reference to the clown suggests, something that belongs on the *popular* stage, or in the circus ring, perhaps, or the sideshow of the travelling fair.

And indeed, direct address can be considered more properly within the purview of the historian of popular performance, even folklore. It is, argues Peter Bailey, 'an ancient feature of popular culture', one that, in the newly industrialized cities of Victorian Britain, was adapted for newly commercialized modes of entertainment. In the new Music Halls, the comic acts were drawn, initially, from pub-based entertainers, whose acts developed out of 'the well-practiced techniques of the street ballad singer'.¹⁰ To pursue this popular history a little further, into the twentieth century Oliver Double – a stand-up comedian and scholar who has written a history of British Variety theatre¹¹ – Music Halls were replaced with Variety theatres, venues that offered ostensibly the same thing: mixed bills of touring 'acts'. To simplify a complex scene: a typical mid-twentieth century Variety act might consist in a person wearing a funny outfit, singing comic songs, and maybe telling a few jokes in between. Gradually, the talk bits got longer and the songs shorter, until some time around the mid-twentieth century there were so-called 'monologuists' doing nothing *but* jokes. Double calls such acts 'embryonic stand-up'. He writes that, 'In the 1920s and 1930s, stand-up comedy was still new enough for people to invent their own variants of

⁹ Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 103.

¹⁰ Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 131-132.

¹¹ Oliver Double, *Britain Had Talent: A History of Variety Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

it, refusing to restrict themselves to just standing there and reeling out gags'.¹² But then, it seems, something changed. Ted Ray, who began performing on the Variety stage in the early 1930s wearing what Double calls a 'cartoonish costume', has this to say:

One day I found myself thinking: You've been wrong all along. Why keep yourself aloof from the audience? Why not be *one* of them? Forget all about comic make-up, the white bowler hat, those fantastic, ridiculous props. Why, there's no need even to bother about a dinner jacket. Just be human. Stroll on the stage in an ordinary suit, just as if you'd walked in from the street.¹³

Although neither Ray nor Double himself make this fully explicit, it is a fair enough conjecture that this change had something to do with the introduction of public address systems into the variety theatres in the early 1930s. Before that, as Ronnie Tate has said, 'You had to learn to throw it out so everybody could hear, but you had to shout your guts out to do it'.¹⁴ The rise of microphone technology rendered effortful vocal projection unnecessary: this is widely accepted. First in radio broadcasting, and later in live performance the microphone 'opened the way to, had indeed demanded, a less forceful, more intimate, more natural kind of vocal production and vocal communication'.¹⁵

It is possible, then, to trace two parallel and yet in many ways complementary historical narratives of speech onstage. One tells of how theatre evolved from direct address towards naturalistic dialogue. The other tells the story of the 'birth' of stand-up from the mixed bag of Variety. Both, it should be added, are necessarily simplified here. I have simplified them in order to demonstrate the shared values at play in both, and reflect on what that tells us about attitudes toward speech: what is 'natural' is privileged over what is perceived to be 'artificial', less 'sophisticated'. Anecdotal and scholarly narratives of stand-up's development also tend to view naturalistic speech as the telos of the artform,

¹² Oliver Double, *Stand Up! On Being a Comedian* (London: Methuen, 1997), p. 30.

¹³ Cited in Double, *Stand Up!*, p. 32.

¹⁴ Cited in Double, *Stand Up!*, p. 36.

¹⁵ Henry Pleasants, *The Great American Popular Singers* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1974), p. 143.

although comedians would not call this speech *naturalistic*. Indeed comedians and scholars of comedy often seem to do everything they can to distance stand-up from practices associated with the theatre. As Double writes, 'Today, there is an idea that the stand-up should present him or herself to the audience undisguised by theatrical artifice, wearing everyday clothes instead of a stage costume'.¹⁶ According to this of kind narrative, the microphone just happens to have come along at the right time, and thus speed the evolution of stand-up performance toward its ultimate aim of becoming just like a conversation (albeit a somewhat one-sided, and yet much wittier and adroitly timed version of one), and thus hardly a performance at all, more like something that naturally happens.

My own study of speech onstage starts out from a critique of this naturalism, which, in Chapter Two, drawing on de Man's work, I suggest, might be thought of as a kind of aesthetic ideology. An ideology of naturalness can be detected both within discourses of stand-up performance and within theories of humour. Just as a theorist can claim that 'Laughter is vital to the human condition',¹⁷ Double can say, of a student stand-up comedian, 'it's clear from the beginning he's a natural'.¹⁸ Although neither claim seems, on the face of it, all that controversial, both, as I argue in Chapter Two, are in need of deconstruction.

Instead of taking pleasure in what feels 'natural', this thesis is responsive to the various discomforts, weird feelings and funny incongruities that arise when a body gets up on a raised platform, stands in front of other bodies, and begins to speak – says something like 'Good evening and thanks for coming' (and here note the importance of beginnings, which tend to be concentrations of awkwardness). In particular, this thesis has an ear for modes of speech that strike awkward compromises between ceremonial formality and casual informality. In order to articulate my understanding – and my enjoyment – of such scenes of speech, I draw on a critical and historical narrative informed by

¹⁶ Double, *Stand-Up!*, p. 31.

¹⁷ Ronald K. L. Collins, 'Comedy and Liberty: the Life and Legacy of Lenny Bruce', *Social Research*, 79:1 (2012), 61-86 (p. 61).

¹⁸ Oliver Double, *Getting the Joke: The Inner Workings of Stand-up Comedy*, 2nd edition, (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 13.

postmodern and poststructuralist thinking, one that emerges from a perceived convergence and intermingling, some time around the late 1950s or early 1960s, of popular entertainment and avant-garde theatrical practice.

Direct address formed a central, even constitutive part in the development of what has been called, in an influential study by Hans-Thies Lehmann, 'postdramatic theatre'. Lehmann frames direct address as a practice whereby 'Theatre is emphasized as a situation, not a fiction.' Direct address, writes Lehmann, makes 'the representational aspect of language recede in favour of its theatrical reality' and can take the form of 'lamentation, prayer, confession or rather "self-accusation" [...] or of "offending the audience"'.¹⁹ As Lehmann himself asserts, that these last two genres of direct audience address also happen to be titles of plays by Peter Handke²⁰ is no coincidence; Handke's works could be considered leading examples of this strand of postdramatic direct address, as could much of the work of two highly influential performance companies, the Wooster Group and Forced Entertainment. Both have been drawn repeatedly to experiment with front-facing performers who speak to the audience, often using microphones. Lehmann considers what he calls 'the caesura of the media society' to be a key context for the development of postdramatic dramaturgies, calling attention to, for example, the Wooster Group's 'high-tech, intermedia aesthetics', their use of video, sound effects and microphones to, as he puts it, 'fragment and infract the dramatic text and the bodies of "characters"'.²¹ Bound up with this use of technology and media onstage is an adoption of what Lehmann terms a 'media aesthetic' via a 'parodic and ironic refraction'.²² This aesthetic is characterized by 'the rapid succession of images, the speed of conversation in shorthand, the gag consciousness of TV comedies, allusions to the popular entertainment of television, to film and television stars, to the day-to-day business of the

¹⁹ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 128.

²⁰ Peter Handke, *Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1997).

²¹ Lehmann, p. 19.

²² Lehmann cites, as examples of this, the work of British-German company Gob Squad, and German theatre maker René Pollesch, in whose work 'punchlines form a text' and 'screwball comedy and sitcom serve as models', p. 168.

entertainment industry'.²³ Of course, what Lehmann is describing here might also, and perhaps more readily be termed 'postmodern'.

In his two key studies, *Liveness* and *From Acting to Performance*, Philip Auslander offers useful terms for the 'crossover' between postmodern 'avant-garde' practices and the sphere of mass culture. Auslander describes the dominant mode of postmodern performance as 'non-matrixed', a term first introduced by Michael Kirby in his 1965 book *Happenings* to describe a mode of performance which made no attempt to pretend that the performer 'is someone other than himself or in some place other than the actual place of performance'.²⁴ Reflecting on the successful film acting careers of, for example, several of the Wooster Group's regular performers, Auslander suggests that, although 'originally meant to differentiate "performing" from conventional acting', non-matrixed performance 'ultimately served as a training ground for the kinds of performance skills demanded by the mass media because, like film acting, it depends on mediation for its significance'.²⁵ It might be added that stand-up comedy could also be thought of as a form of non-matrixed performance, and has, at various times been quoted and referenced by practitioners of postmodern performance.

For the purposes of my own study, which foregrounds the act of speaking, I wish to emphasize the central role that the microphone has played in the development of both stand-up comedy and key works of so-called postdramatic theatre. It seems to me that previous studies, including Lehmann's, do not place nearly enough emphasis on the microphone: it is not only a stage tool, something a performer might use, but, a place, a position, a stage-in-itself. And it is not only a convenient way of making speech louder,²⁶ but invites (and

²³ Lehmann, p. 168.

²⁴ By means of example, Kirby offers the following scene: 'The orchestra conductor walks on stage, bows to the audience, raises his baton, and the curtain falls'. This is another formalized beginning that, to me, suggests the potential for a certain kind of awkward funniness (Michael Kirby, *Happenings: An Illustrated Anthology* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1965), p. 27).

²⁵ Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 34.

²⁶ As, for instance, folklorist Ian Brodie suggests in his recent study of stand-up comedy: the microphone is that which 'makes one loud without forcing one to be loud' (Ian Brodie, *A Vulgar*

perhaps demands) a particular *kind* of speaking. It is my contention that the microphone does not *simply* make things louder: by amplifying speech that sounds 'intimate' and 'natural', the microphone makes things weird. And, it is when postmodern theatre puts the microphone on a theatrical stage, a place of signification, that this weirdness becomes manifest. For, in semiotic terms, the microphone is a signifier *of* speech (indeed, a search for 'speech' on Google Images returns, almost exclusively, stock images of, and featuring, microphones). Another doubling, then, in the direct address spoken at a microphone: on a stage, the microphone *signifies* 'speech', at the same moment as making it louder.

It is this doubling (I am speaking to you, and I am showing that I am speaking to you) that makes the theatrical direct address inherently funny. And it is in the postmodern theatre that this funniness is exploited; indeed, in several notable cases a certain funny sensibility becomes the dominant or defining mode of a postmodern or postdramatic performance practice. Drawing on my own personal experience, and predilection, I am thinking here, in particular, of the work of Forced Entertainment and Lone Twin, two British companies who have enjoyed a considerable amount of success on the European festival circuit over the past twenty (and more) years. This thesis is not a study of the work of either Forced Entertainment or Lone Twin, but its understanding (and appreciation) of a certain kind of funny speech on stage has been strongly influenced by my experiences of the work of both. In the chapters that follow, I seek to test and extend understandings of performance developed out of years of spectating, discussing (and, it must be acknowledged, attempting to emulate) not only the performance, but more particularly the jokes, of these particular practitioners.

At this juncture, and in order to move my discussion into new territory, I wish to call upon a set of terms proposed by Larry Lynch in his discussion of the speech practices of Lone Twin. Throughout their work (which ranges from outdoor performances, often involving a lot of shouting, to full-scale ensemble theatre shows), Lone Twin's Gary Winters and Gregg Whelan appropriate

modes of public address from popular entertainment genres, such as ‘Good evening everyone, and thanks for coming’; ‘Thank you, and goodnight’. Lynch suggests that this citational quality, which he calls *speechness*, inheres in ‘the way in which recognizable modes and styles of public address are displaced from their original context and reconfigured for different purposes’.²⁷ Such utterances, write Lynch, ‘tell us of the work’s gigness or showness’, and in relation to this proliferation of nesses (ness-nesses), Lynch clarifies: ‘I put it like this because we know that it is not a gig, or show, not in that way. This play and displacement of speech genres in turn enables a play and displacement of the performance itself’.²⁸

In Lynch’s model, the *gigness* or *showness* of such performances relates to our knowledge that this is *not* a gig or a show. By this logic, the quality of a performance’s *speechness* remains ambiguous: it is not clear whether Lynch is saying that the *speechness* has to do with our knowledge that this is not a speech, in the sense of a formal public address, or with our sense that this is, somehow, *not speech*. This is an ambiguity that I find useful. Perhaps somehow, impossibly, the performance of speech is interesting to us because we know it is, somehow, not speech, at least ‘not in that way’. If Lynch is right, and speech in performance is speech that announces its own *speechness*, and in doing so tells us it is somehow *not speech*, then this kind of ontological doubt, or doubleness, could be counted amongst the central problems of performance theory. Speech in performance is somehow, then, recognizable simultaneously as speech and *not speech* – as something *like* speech but not quite it. An investigation of speech in performance, therefore, cannot help but ask ontological questions about speech. Questions that relate to the doubling and the redoubling of the body, and the act, in the moment of direct address: I am speaking to you, and I am showing that I am speaking to you, but also, I am not *really* speaking to you. These are also, as I will argue, questions that relate to the curious ontology of ‘just joking’.

²⁷ Lynch, Larry, ‘Speechness: Grammar and Play in the Writing of Lone Twin’, in *Lone Twin: Journeys, Performances, Conversations* ed. by David Williams and Carl Lavery (Aberystwyth: Performance Research, 2011), pp. 245-251 (p. 245).

²⁸ Lynch, p. 248.

3. Just a joke

I wish, now, to offer what will serve as a paradigmatic example of the kind of speech act that will animate my thinking in the chapters that follow. Standing onstage at the Leicester Square Theatre in London, in November 2009, the stand-up comedian Stewart Lee has been, for some minutes talking about Richard Hammond, at the time a presenter with the BBC's highly popular motoring magazine programme *Top Gear*. He has already made it clear that he dislikes, indeed hates *Top Gear* 'cause it's willfully and deliberately incorrect, right?' As a student in the nineteen eighties, someone who identified himself as an 'Alternative Comedian' in the 'era of political correctness', Lee says, 'I like political correctness, I think it's good'.²⁹ And so, he says, he has been trying to work out which of the three *Top Gear* presenters he detests the most, and has settled on Richard Hammond. And then he starts talking about Hammond, indeed, he talks about him for upwards of twenty minutes. But one thing he says about Hammond is more memorable, and has aroused a great deal more discussion, than anything else Lee said onstage that night (or any of the other nights on which he performed the same material onstage):

'I wish he'd been killed in that crash,' he says. 'I wish he'd been killed and... decapitated'.

Lee is referring the high-speed dragster crash that occurred during filming three years earlier, in 2006 – an accident that left Hammond with serious head injuries. An accident that *did* nearly kill him. And so, at the Leicester Square Theatre, Lee's remark meets with a shocked and disbelieving murmur.

Well, I do,'

He walks to the front of the stage, purposefully, and adds,

²⁹ This routine can be viewed on Stewart Lee, *If You Prefer a Milder Comedian Please Ask for One*, dir. by Tim Kirkby (Comedy Central/Real Talent, 2001), DVD. This and subsequent quotations from the performance of this routine are taken from the transcript of this recording published as Stewart Lee, *The "If You Prefer a Milder Comedian Please Ask for One" EP* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), pp. 52-63.

'...and if that seems a bit much for all the *Top Gear* viewers... It's just a joke, like on *Top Gear*.'

Now, in the audience, something changes. I remember it changing: I remember that I laughed, and in laughing I identified and gave voice to my own position – as one who disagreed with, was angered by, the kind of speech for which *Top Gear*, and particularly Hammond's co-presenter, Jeremy Clarkson, had during that period become renowned. To cite just a few examples, there was the 'lighthearted' reference to sex workers being murdered in 2008;³⁰ comments that 'reinforced stereotypes' of Mexican people in 2010; an anachronistic schoolyard rhyme containing the 'n word' on camera in 2013;³¹ and comments during the 'India Special' that resulted in the Indian High Commission complaining to the BBC about the presenters' 'cheap jibes' that 'lacked cultural sensitivity'.³² On each of these occasions, there were calls from some quarters for the BBC to discipline or suspend Clarkson, and more than once the corporation responded by saying that *Top Gear*'s viewers had 'clear expectations' about his humour.³³ When, in 2014, *Top Gear* was found to have breached Ofcom guidelines by including Clarkson's 'casually racist' way of referring to Asian people during a location-shoot in Burma, producer Andy Wilman responded to complaints by saying it was part of 'a lighthearted wordplay joke'.³⁴

By making what he himself admits is an 'indefensible joke' about Hammond's car accident, Lee is, it seems, demonstrating the insufficiency of the defence,

³⁰ BBC News, 'Clarkson Joke Sparks Complaints' (4 November 2008) <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/7707641.stm>> [accessed 17 September 2016].

³¹ David Collins, 'Jeremy Clarkson N-Word Shame: *Top Gear* Presenter Caught on Camera Using Racist Rhyme', *Daily Mirror* (1 May 2014) <<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/jeremy-clarkson-top-gear-presenter-3480875>> [accessed 5 April 2016].

³² Christopher Hope, 'India Demands Apology Over *Top Gear* "India Special"', *Daily Telegraph* (11 January 2012) <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/bbc/9007554/India-demands-apology-over-Top-Gear-India-special.html>> [accessed 5 April 2016].

³³ BBC News, 'Clarkson Joke Sparks Complaints'.

³⁴ BBC News, 'Top Gear Burma Episode Breached Ofcom Rules' (28 July 2014) <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-28522450>> [accessed 17 September 2016].

'it's just a joke'. So far, so good. We know what Lee is doing when he says:

'It's just a joke' – the Jeremy Clarkson defence – 'It's just a joke'. So when I said that I wished that Richard Hammond had been decapitated and killed, right, like when they do their jokes on Top Gear, it's just a joke.

But then, in a subtle way, something he says complicates the scene:

But coincidentally... as well as it being a joke, it's also what I wish had happened.

With this coda, the question of what it is that is happening here (and whether or not 'it' is something Lee could be said to be 'doing') becomes exponentially more troubling. In the midst of the gig, this moment is weirdly, enjoyably baffling. It stages a question that, I argue, remains suspended long after the gig has finished. Each of the parts of the utterance changes his listeners' perception of the kind of act, he seems to be doing: first he says he wishes Hammond had died, eliciting shocked murmurs from his audience. Then he says, 'it's just a joke', implying 'I was not serious, *I do not wish that*'. A slight shift in the crowd, some relief perhaps. Then, by saying 'like on *Top Gear*', Lee appears to reveal his broader rationale, and the fact that *he knows what he is doing*. Cue satisfied laughter. But *then*, in a further move, he says 'coincidentally, it's *also what I wish*'. Now some laughs, some confusion: what is it that Lee is doing by speaking thus? Lee's final move, the apparent admission that he does *coincidentally* wish what he says he wishes, once again, raises – and, I think, displaces – the question of his 'true' intentions. This question is not resolved, certainly not within the bounds of the gig, and not by Lee's subsequent explanations of his intentions – on paper, or 'in person'.

When this show was filmed at the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow on 15 March 2010, Lee looked directly into the camera and said:

just in case there's anyone from the *Mail on Sunday* watching this, I was using an exaggerated form of the rhetoric and implied values of *Top*

Gear to satirize the rhetoric and implied values of *Top Gear*. And it's a shame to have to break character and explain that. But hopefully it will save you a long, tedious exchange of emails.

When a transcript of this show was published in paperback by Faber and Faber, Lee added further clarification of his intentions via footnotes. Regarding the above clarification, he explains that it was added after the publication of a story in the *Mail on Sunday* titled 'What Prompted Comic's Sick Tirade Against Old Schoolmate Richard Hammond?',³⁵ so that 'my intentions were made absolutely explicit and no one trying to stir things up could pretend that they had not explicitly been told the point of the piece'.³⁶ On paper, and in person, Lee is providing two versions of the 'explanatory aside'. Onstage, Lee 'breaks character' to provide the spoken equivalent of a footnote; in his book, Lee footnotes *this* to offer further explanation. But, it might be argued that, even in spite of this repeated insistence as to his 'intentions', nothing that Lee says can retrospectively nullify the utterance. Nothing can change the fact that, whether or not he meant it, *he did say it*. To even say that he wishes a real man had died in a real accident that really was life-threatening feels like a transgression of the boundaries of the gig; it feels like a *serious* thing to do.

If 'it's just a joke' is the 'Jeremy Clarkson defence', then what we might call the 'Stewart Lee defence' might be summarized thus: 'I was demonstrating that to say "it's just a joke" is not enough to excuse the speaker from responsibility for speech that is harmful'. The irony is, of course, that for the 'Stewart Lee defence' to work, it also has to *not* work, by *not* excusing *him* from the responsibility for his own utterance. Thus, with a little prodding, it becomes clear that the ethical and political stakes of this 'joke' (or non-joke) are by no means as clear-cut as Lee's 'explanation' implies.

In the aftermath of Clarkson's eventual sacking by the BBC in March 2015 (after a so-called 'fracas' with a producer while filming), there appeared online and in

³⁵ James Tapper, 'What prompted comic's sick tirade against his Top Gear schoolmate?', *Mail on Sunday* (30 August 200) <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1209921/What-prompted-comedians-tirade-old-schoolmate-Richard-Hammond.html>> [accessed 5 April 2016].

³⁶ Footnote in Lee, *The "If You Prefer ... EP* p. 63.

the press numerous articles that, in a mood approaching fond nostalgia, revisited ‘the biggest gaffes made by the star’.³⁷ This has a lot to tell us about the politics of speech in Britain in the early 21st Century, an era in which it seems ‘I was only joking’ and equivalent comments have become more frequently heard, insistently proffered, and increasingly contested. In the immediate aftermath of Clarkson’s suspension from *Top Gear* for an ‘unprovoked physical and verbal attack’³⁸ on a *Top Gear* producer, he was reported to have criticized the BBC in ‘expletive laden rant’ at a charity auction staged at the Roundhouse, an arts venue in North London.³⁹ The following Sunday, Clarkson used his column in *The Sunday Times* to claim ‘it was all meant in jest’, a claim that was itself reported in several other newspapers.⁴⁰ The ‘Jeremy Clarkson defence’ thus sustains its own micro-economy of intrigue. Reluctant as I may be to allow him the valorization of ‘relevance’, Clarkson’s career has something to tell us about the politics of public speech in Britain in the early 21st Century. As a professional controversialist, Clarkson is both celebrated and censured for his spoken transgressions; more than that, he is celebrated *for* being censured. In the British media, there is an economy of speech that is sustained by and therefore *requires* questionable or provocative or otherwise scandalous speech conduct (bad speech, wrong speech, offensive or ‘non-PC’ speech) in order to provoke further acts of speech (condemnations and complaints, accusations/shamings, apologies or self-justifications, retrenchments/counter punches, defences, and the various opinion pieces).

A brief glance at the news stories in the British press on any particular day over the past ten to fifteen years might suggest that the British public have a compulsive interest in people saying things that are, to put it crudely, either

³⁷ See, for example Sky News, ‘Top Gaffes: How Clarkson Fuelled Controversy’ (25 March 2015), <<http://news.sky.com/story/1253913/top-gaffes-how-clarkson-fuelled-controversy>> [accessed 29 March 2015].

³⁸ Anita Singh, ‘Jeremy Clarkson Sacked by the BBC: Official’, *Daily Telegraph* (25 March 2015) <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/bbc/11494513/Jeremy-Clarkson-sacked-by-the-BBC-official.html>> [accessed 29 March 2015].

³⁹ Daniel Welsh, ‘Jeremy Clarkson Fires at BBC in Shocking Rant’, *Huffington Post* (20 March 2015) <http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/03/20/jeremy-clarkson-bbc-top-gear-suspension-sacked_n_6907856.html> [accessed 29 March 2015].

⁴⁰ Stories of this kind appeared in the 22 March 2015 editions of the *Independent*, *Daily Mirror*, *Telegraph*, and *Evening Standard*.

stupid or wrong. Such speech continues to ‘act’ – have force – and it seems to elicit a curious kind of compulsion to return, replay. Newspapers reprint the hateful utterances of the disgraced so that their readers can experience and re-experience the feeling of being offended.

Purely on the basis of this kind of media coverage, it seems that an anxiety about public speaking is mixed with a curious sort of pleasure in other people’s mistakes and transgressions, one that cannot be explained away as simple *schadenfreude*, or the conscientious desire to learn how *not* to do it (although both are in play). Is it possible that what is being called into play (and, by the media organizations, exploited), is some kind of compulsive fascination with the unpredictable power of speech? A sense of being both disconcerted and, perhaps, occasionally thrilled, by the way that an utterance can act (and continue to act), apparently in excess of its speaker’s intentions?

4. Funny ethics

The question of ‘only joking’ concerns, in a theoretical sense, the line between speech and conduct – in other words, something that is ‘only’ speech, and something that is actually done. The terms with which such a discussion might most productively be pursued were set out by the philosopher J.L. Austin, in *How to Do Things With Words*, his seminal explication of performativity. Austin began his exposition by drawing together a handful of utterances that, he argued, could not be considered as either true or false statements. Utterances such as ‘I promise...’, ‘I apologize...’, ‘I dare you to...’ do not *describe* something; instead they *perform an act*, and do so in the moment of being uttered. To say ‘I promise...’ (in the appropriate circumstances) is to *make* a promise.⁴¹

This project proposes a reading of Austin’s work made possible by the writing of Shoshana Felman in *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*. Felman writes that the

⁴¹ J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 3.

object of Austin's performative theory is 'the *rethinking* of the human act',⁴² and reminds us of something it is surprisingly easy to lose sight of: the speech act is a *bodily* act. This fact is, to adopt Felman's term, *scandalous* inasmuch as the body is always to some extent unknowing about what it performs. Because a speech act often implies (and sometimes explicitly attests to) the speaker's *intention* in so speaking, speech and the body are held in 'a relation consisting at once of incongruity and inseparability'. As far as the performative utterance is concerned, 'the scandal consists in the fact that the act cannot know what it is doing'.⁴³

The effect of 'incongruity' is at the heart of Felman's conception of the speaking body. This incongruity plays a structural role, characterizing as it does the manner of the relation between language and the body: they are inseparable, but not the same. Neither are they virulently opposed; 'incongruous inseparability' suggests something more nuanced, something a little bit odd, awkward, and – crucially – funny. According to Simon Critchley, 'incongruity theory' is amongst the dominant explanations of humour offered by the history of ideas; as James Russell Lowell, in 1870, writes: 'Humour in its first analysis is a perception of the incongruous'. And, adds Critchley, the work of Kant, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard, amongst others, offers distinct takes on this basic premise'.⁴⁴ The funniness of this incongruous interrelation between language and the body will be tested and conceptualized as the thesis unfolds. At this early stage, I wish to frame the question of incongruity in terms of its ability to generate contradictory affects: humour is pleasurable, and yet the ill-fittingness of that which is 'incongruous' can also be uncomfortable. The coming-together of these two affects – enjoyment and discomfort – makes for an ambivalent feeling that I am calling funniness.

Judith Butler, in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, writes that the 'bodily referent' is

⁴² Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J.L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, trans. by Catherine Porter, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 64.

⁴³ Felman, p. 96.

⁴⁴ In Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 3.

'a condition of me that I can point to, but that I cannot narrate precisely'.⁴⁵ This echoes her formulation from *Excitable Speech*, where she named the body as the 'blindspot of speech'.⁴⁶ When she did so, Butler was responding to Felman's reading of Austin. If, in her encounter with Felman's concept, Butler comes close to acknowledging the comic, she does not do so directly. She owns that Austin's tract is 'an amusing catalogue of failed performatives',⁴⁷ and relates this to the fact that the body, always to some extent 'unknowing about what it performs [...] always says something that it does not intend, and is not the emblem of mastery and control that it sometimes purports to be'.⁴⁸ But even though her own formulations suggest it, Butler does not tug at what I read as implied in both Felman's and her own emphasis on the 'speaking body': that there may be some latent, inherent funniness in the very idea of a body that speaks.

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler's reflections on the body in speech turn toward the central role that acts of self-narration play in moral and ethical thought. Unlike some traditional moral philosophies, the relational ethics Butler is proposing in this book does not proceed from the individual's enlightened self-knowledge. On the contrary, this is an ethics based on the apprehension that the subject is, necessarily, 'opaque to itself, not fully knowable to itself'.⁴⁹ And so, at the scene of speech, one's attempt to give an account of oneself will always necessarily falter on that question of what, precisely, constitutes the 'I': the first-person pronoun, the 'I' that must be deployed recurrently within the account, can never fully coincide with the self – the singularly embodied self – that speaks it. And thus, when one attempts to give an account of oneself, the invocation of the first-person pronoun, 'I', which is unavoidable in any self-description, is 'paradoxically, a performative and non-narrative act, even as it functions as the fulcrum for narrative itself'.⁵⁰ Butler is by no means intending to

⁴⁵ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Ashland, Ohio: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 38.

⁴⁶ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech* (New York; London: Routledge, 1997), p. 10.

⁴⁷ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 16.

⁴⁸ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 10.

⁴⁹ Butler, *Giving an Account*, p. 19.

⁵⁰ Butler, *Giving an Account*, p. 66.

offer a theory of postmodern theatre, or indeed stand-up comedy here, but her formulations are unexpectedly suggestive when considered in relation to certain scenes from both, scenes I consider in this thesis: scenes which stage the body as a thing that speaks, and a thing to be seen speaking. For example, Stewart Lee telling a story about himself undergoing an investigative medical procedure describing his naked body while he stands in front of us, fully clothed, his body becoming weirdly, intensely present and yet displaced (Chapter Four). Or the various bodies onstage during Kinkaleri's *I Cenci/Spettacolo*, bodies that for the most part seem to be persistently, even stubbornly, avoiding speech, in spite of the conspicuous presence of a microphone on a stand slap-bang in the middle of the stage, a microphone that remains there (and remains 'live', switched on) for the duration of the performance. If something hilarious (although, as I will explain at length in Chapter Three, curiously not laugh-out-loud hilarious) pervades this performance, it might have to do with the apprehension of some latent, inherent funniness in the very idea of a body that can speak.

In the chapters that follow, I dedicate considerably more attention to Stewart Lee than to Kinkaleri (or indeed any other practitioner of performance, unless perhaps, you consider J.L. Austin as a practitioner which, as it happens, I do). When I set out on this thesis project, it was not my intention that so much of it would be taken up with Stewart Lee. However, as will become clear, in the context of the relational ethics developed by Butler – an ethics from which I draw my sense of a speaking body's inherent funniness – Stewart Lee's performance is particularly interesting and, at certain moments, peculiarly demanding. When we watch Stewart Lee 'give an account of himself', we are looking at a body that we know has on some level *chosen* to put itself in that position of exposure – the person we see onstage is also the author, a person who has chosen to appear as his 'self' (and who has made a successful career of doing so). And yet, the funniness of Lee's speaking body comes into play particularly at moments when he is performing (as though) reluctantly. He does not (seem to) want to be onstage, speaking, telling jokes, standing up, appearing. What makes such sequences weirdly, discomfortingly funny is the way in which it seems that the *speech* (of Stewart Lee) is putting the *body* (of Stewart Lee) in a position of exposure, or vague humiliation. In Chapters Two

and Four, by focusing on two such moments from two of Lee's stage shows, I begin to work out how the latent funniness of the speaking body might, in being mobilized on a stage, offer a starting point for ethical thought.

5. Funny feeling

Have you ever had the feeling you are lying, when in fact you are telling the truth? Imagine, for example, the following scenario. You are not well. You need to excuse yourself from some social or professional engagement. You make a phone call, or send an email. You apologize profusely. The more you apologize, the more you feel suspected of lying. And so you provide some details, evidence: you have a cough, a temperature, you have vomited twice already. The more you speak, the more you have the peculiar feeling that your illness may, in fact, *be* fictional.

I draw this example from the work of Denise Riley who, in her study *Impersonal Passion* argues that the peculiar affective power of speech stems from the paradoxical fact that language is impersonal: 'its working through and across us is indifferent to us, yet in the same blow it constitutes the fibre of the personal'.⁵¹ Both a philosopher and a poet, Riley sets out to listen to the 'common twists of speech which themselves enact feeling, rather than simply and obediently conveying as we elect'.⁵² Many of the affective peculiarities she describes in her study – the victim's need to hear an apology outweighing the need for that apology to be sincere, feeling as if you are lying when conveying a perfectly true reason for your absence at some event – stem from a disjuncture between the conventionality of a linguistic form and the concrete, personal context in which it is being used. For instance, when you 'call in sick' you might well feel *as though* you are lying, 'due not to a psychology of guilt but to the formulaic social excuse which overwhelms any truth content'.⁵³ In Riley's summation, 'the

⁵¹ Denise Riley, *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 1.

⁵² Riley, p. 3.

⁵³ Riley, p. 5.

gulf between the ostensible content of what's said, and the affect which seeps from the very form of the words' can generate 'tension, unease, or a feeling of dispossession'.⁵⁴ If the 'funny' of this project has much to do with taking enjoyment in language, and to a certain extent *loving* language, this is inseparable from a discomfiting sense of language's strangeness, its peculiar power. Perhaps it has to do with a sense of guilt or confusion about the enjoyment of language. It is laughing at something and simultaneously feeling weird about it.

In framing my mode of scholarly attention in terms of funniness, or the funny, I am influenced by Sianne Ngai's work on 'weak or trivial' aesthetic categories,⁵⁵ which she defines in contrast to the 'moral and theological resonances of the beautiful and the sublime and the powerfully uplifting and shattering emotions of the sublime and the disgusting' upon which the aesthetic tradition focuses.⁵⁶ Similarly, unlike terms such as 'laughter', 'humour', 'comedy' or 'the comic' – all terms that have been the subject of much philosophical speculation – 'funny' is a word likely to be uttered in a concrete situation in which you do, indeed, *find something funny*. Saying 'that's so funny' is a way of describing an aesthetic response, albeit one that sounds fairly trivial, even a bit non-committal, alongside the more traditional appraisals concerning the 'beauty' and 'power' (and even 'truth') of a work of art.

The funniness I am pursuing might be thought of as comparable to the 'minor and generally unprestigious' feelings that Ngai writes about in her 2005 book *Ugly Feelings*.⁵⁷ This kind of focus offers the opportunity to rethink a philosophical discourse of emotions stretching back to Aristotle. In contrast to the grand passions, such as anger and fear, privileged by this tradition, weaker and more pervasive feelings such as paranoia, anxiety, or irritation are *noncathartic*: they promise no 'therapeutic or purifying release.' Indeed, such 'ugly feelings' are often 'explicitly amoral' – the kind of feelings you might feel

⁵⁴ Riley, p. 2.

⁵⁵ Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 21.

⁵⁶ Ngai, p. 18.

⁵⁷ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 6.

bad about feeling because they 'interfere with the outpouring of other emotions'.⁵⁸

Although a feeling that something is funny is often thought of as positive, even joyous, it is not quite the same as hilarity. And, although I am writing about jokes and comedy, it is not the phenomenon of laughter itself that motivates my enquiries. Indeed, I find the persistence of the idea that laughter is a release of tension, or repressed emotion, can tend to close down discussion, as if this emphatic and involuntary 'explosion' constitutes the totality of the utterance's effect, on a person or a situation. As if it is the endpoint, no more explanation required. Like Ngai's ugly feelings, which are 'defined by a flatness or ongoingness entirely opposed to the "suddenness" on which Aristototele's aesthetics of fear depends',⁵⁹ finding something *funny* does not necessarily have an end-point. Hence, the exclamation 'that's so funny!' can accompany laughter, but more often than not, it *takes the place* of laughter. After all, the funny can be 'funny-peculiar' or 'funny-ha-ha', and this ambivalence is something I want to hold onto. This ambivalent kind of funniness is not something that can be flushed out with a single, decisive moment of laughter: it worms its way into the body and waits there, to return at the least expected moments. If this sounds creepy, then I would add: it is not necessarily an unwelcome inhabitation. After all, to call something, or someone, 'funny', could also be thought of as a gesture of affectionate mockery, a fuzzy intimacy of the kind played out in the old song *My Funny Valentine*, wherein 'funny' is a term of both affection and sly belittling.

Much of my work here has been driven by my sense that finding something funny – in all the nuanced, particular ways that something can *be* or *feel* or *seem* funny – is one of the most tangible, vivid relations I can have with any object of study. Furthermore, it may be that there is something funny about the level of attention required to investigate the feeling of finding something funny. There is something funny about this level of attention, this way of going about research, which could be quite aptly described as 'getting stuck'. I was going to

⁵⁸ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 7

⁵⁹ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 7

write 'getting stuck deliberately', but in fact I am not so certain the adverb 'deliberately' is applicable here, at least not straightforwardly. After all, when I spent a whole year writing about a single joke about a tea cosy (Chapter Two), it did not *feel* deliberate: part of me wanted, and tried, desperately, to move on. If parsing the meaning of a tea cosy begins to sound like an irreverently trivial way to go about research, it is one that by no means lacks a sense of urgency. The littleness, the triviality, of that which is funny, and therefore that which I am studying, means that my project has had to confront, repeatedly, the question of relevance. How might writing that emerges from a vague yet persistent feeling that *something is funny* work its way toward political and ethical questions? This is the project I take up, in various ways, in each of the chapters that follows.

As I have already intimated, I am interested in the various ways in which speech can make us feel weird. If, as Riley suggests, the affective weirdness that so often attends speech has to do with gulf between what words say and what they do, this is also productive of pleasure. The backdrop for this enquiry is the recognition that speech can not only give us pleasure, but equally make us feel funny-peculiar, and yet this discomforting peculiarity is also something to which we might be drawn, compulsively, because we sort of like it.

Concomitantly, the fact that speech can make us feel so funny it itself, on occasion, absurdly humorous. That grown men and women can be reduced to blabbering, giggling, or awkward wrecks by the uttering of a few words? Now *that's* funny. This points to something else – that we are *identified* and identify ourselves by what we find funny. We identify our social subjectivities with and in our own moments of laughing. Often, in the moment of laughing, what we are finding funny is *that* we find *this* funny – and in the case of certain potentially divisive or controversial jokes, the redoubling of this self-identificatory laughter can count as a moment of defiant self-positioning. Saying 'that's funny' or 'that's not funny' is not only a way of claiming allegiance with or separation from this or that social group or class, it can also double as a way of taking a moral or ethical stance. But the way in which the phrase 'that's not funny' can function as an accusatory chastisement *and* the ineffectual cry of the humiliated (often simultaneously) points to the shifting power relations of the scene.

If speech in performance is speech that announces its own speechness, and in doing so tells us it is somehow *not* speech, then this kind of ontological doubt, or doubleness, could be counted amongst the central problems of performance and performative theory. And, it might be added, speech that is *funny* further complicates this scene, as does the problem of what it means to be 'joking'. For, a joke can be forceful, it *works*, yet on an ontological level, it remains 'only joking'; the utterance that both *works*, on us, and somehow does not work, announces its own *not-ness*.

6. Pissing and myth-making

In July 2009 the *Guardian's* comedy critic Brian Logan wrote an article about the so-called 'New Offensiveness', citing social psychologist Sue Becker's identification of 'resurgent bigotry in British comedy'. Citing examples from Little Britain to Ricky Gervais, Scott Capurro to Richard Herring, Logan heralded an age in which 'all the bigotries and the misogyny you thought had been banished forever from mainstream entertainment have made a startling comeback'. Logan framed this as a reaction against the 'right-on orthodoxy' propagated by Alternative Comedians in the 1980s, a movement made up of 'proudly anti-racist, anti-sexist comics'.⁶⁰

Lee has narrated his own place in this history in his part-autobiography, part technical manual on stand-up comedy, *How I Escaped My Certain Fate* (2010), which opens with the line: 'I never really wanted to be a "comedian". I wanted to be an Alternative Comedian, because all other types of comedian were sell-out scum'.⁶¹ Lee goes on to recount a certain origin story of British stand-up prevalent in the late 1980s, when he began performing: 'for my generation of London-circuit stand-up comedians there was a Year Zero attitude to 1979'. The story tells of how, 'with a few incendiary post-punk punchlines, Alexei

⁶⁰ Brian Logan, 'The New Offenders of Stand-Up Comedy', *Guardian* (27 July 2009) <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/jul/27/comedy-standup-new-offenders>> [accessed 15th October 2014].

⁶¹ Stewart Lee, *How I Escaped My Certain Fate: The Life and Deaths of a Stand-Up Comedian* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 1.

Sayle, Arnold Brown, Dawn French and Andy de la Tour destroyed the British comedy hegemony of Upper-Class Oxbridge Satirical Songs and Working-Class Bow Tie-Sporting Racism'. Lee acknowledges that this is a 'simplified fable'. For one thing, 'It's a romantic exaggeration to claim that The Comedy Store had an ideological position. It did, for about a week in 1980, but it didn't when it started and obviously its policy today is defined by commercial imperatives alone'.⁶² Yet he admits feeling nostalgic about the 1980s, and there are certain elements of this simplified history that still seem to code his understanding of comedy, particularly how it relates to class. The 'majority of live stand-up in Britain' in the late 1970s and early 1980s consisted in 'increasingly dated and dubious working-men's-club comics' telling bigoted jokes. And the after-effects of the fifties satire boom meant that 'high-profile left-field TV and radio shows' such as *Not The Nine O'Clock News* were still helmed by Oxbridge graduates. Although Lee himself is, he acknowledges, an Oxbridge graduate, having attended Oxford's Edmund Hall, he writes, 'In my early days on the circuit, I kept the exact location of my education a secret' because 'the Alternative Comedy scene that was swiftly becoming the dominant trope was expressly and understandably against this privileged old guard'.⁶³

According to Lee's narrative, all this began to change as the 'right-on' politics of the 1980s gave way to the irony-tinged 'new laddism' of the 1990s. In 1993, comic duo Rob Newman and David Baddiel played Wembley Arena, the latter flying above the arena on a wire, leading to declarations as to comedy being 'the new Rock'n'Roll'. Lee describes this as the moment that 'changed comedy in Britain for ever, probably for the worse'. Suddenly, he writes, 'stand-up looked like a career option for ambitious young people, and a cash cow for unscrupulous promoters'.⁶⁴ As Lee has it, this shift in perception, along with the cultish popularity of David Baddiel and Frank Skinner's *Fantasy Football* (a television show in which the two comedians who might previously have been doing political stuff on the Alternative scene sat on a sofa and made jokes about football) led to a change in the atmosphere of comedy clubs:

⁶² Lee, *How I Escaped*, pp. 1-3.

⁶³ Lee, *How I Escaped*, p. 11.

⁶⁴ Lee, *How I Escaped*, p. 20.

Football fans and so-called 'new lads' began to feel welcome at once 'alternative' comedy venues, in their Ben Sherman shirts, and within five years the comedy counter-culture which our illustrious eighties stand-up comedy forebears shed blood to build, in the post-punk shadows of fat working men's club comics and elitist Oxbridge satirists, was destroyed.⁶⁵

This narrative, simplified and heavily biased as it may be, is important for understanding Lee's work. Not least because he retells it in a way that makes it sound as though he does not fully believe it himself. Perhaps here he is 'in character' as the 'smug, stuck-up, politically correct, holier than thou leftie' that, according to Lee, his stage persona sometimes veers towards (as Lee adds, this is 'a character I have researched so thoroughly I often feel obliged to behave like it in my own spare time, sometimes for years on end').⁶⁶

Keeping in mind Lee's complaints about the rise of laddishness, his position on political correctness and his aversion to the 'old boy's club' of a British establishment dominated by Oxbridge graduates (in spite of the fact that he himself is one), I want to spend a few moments considering the position, and the myth, of the stand-up comedian as a cultural figure. Lee's book, *How I Escaped My Certain Fate: The Lives and Deaths of a Stand-Up Comedian*, tells the story of his return to stand-up after a four-year hiatus. After some modest television success as part of the double act Lee and Herring in the mid-nineties, around 1999 Lee found himself disheartened, and out of fashion, playing to dwindling and increasingly apathetic crowds. He quietly gave up stand-up, turning his attention instead to journalism and the satirical musical *Jerry Springer: The Opera*. However, by 2004, he writes,

the simplicity of stand-up, the fact that you can think of an idea in the afternoon, after a long lie in, and implement it in the evening, suddenly seemed very attractive to me, now that I was a commercial theatre director whose attempts to make even the slightest change to the work required separate sets of instructions to literally dozens of people⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Lee, *How I Escaped*, p. 71.

⁶⁶ Stewart Lee interviewed for an extra feature on Lee, *If You Prefer a Milder DVD*.

⁶⁷ Lee, *How I Escaped*, p. 29.

He returned to the Edinburgh Fringe that year with a new show titled, in a blunt statement of intent, *Stewart Lee: Stand-Up Comedian*, having realized, as he puts it, ‘that stand-up was just one man on a stage in a room. And so stand-up was infinite. [...] one man on stage in a room could be anything at all, go anywhere, say anything, suggest anything, do anything’.⁶⁸ Interesting that even the proudly politically correct Lee resorts to ‘man’ when asserting, and celebrating, what it is that makes stand-up stand-up (and, it might be added, what makes stand-up *not* theatre).

Is the paradigmatic figure of a stand-up comedian a man? To phrase the question in this way is not the same as asking whether people who are *not* men make good comedians, or harking back to that unhelpfully persistent debate around the question: ‘are women funny?’⁶⁹ To acknowledge the possibility of even formulating *that* question is to risk providing the opportunity for the debate to be resuscitated, without its terms being challenged. During this thesis project I have found myself walking a difficult line between a commitment to anti-essentialist thinking on gender and a need to acknowledge that there is something funny about Stewart Lee that has to do with his maleness, or – to subtly shift terms – a funniness that emanates from the fact of him standing and speaking *as a man*. This has, in part, to do with exemplarity, a rethinking of which is a key to the conceptual enquiry of this thesis. Before we embark upon that work, it will be useful to negotiate a path around a something that may, if not acknowledged and deflated, loom over the proceedings in an unhelpful way. I will do so via a brief example, one that is offered by John Limon, at the start of his 2000 book *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*. As part of his effort to define stand-up comedy as ‘an absolute or ideal genre’, Limon

⁶⁸ Lee, *How I Escaped*, p. 39.

⁶⁹ Most recently reignited by Lee Mack, as reported by Chris Hastings, “Women can’t do stand-up because they’re not show-offs”: Lee Mack Claims Comedy is More Suited to Male Personalities’, *Daily Mail* (28 September 2013) <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2436939/Women-stand--theyre-offs-Lee-Mack-claims-comedy-suited-male-personalities.html>> [accessed 20 September 2016]. For a counter argument, see Bridget Christie, ‘The “Are Women Funny?” Debate Is As Dead as Christopher Hitchens’, *Guardian* (1 October 2013) <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/01/are-women-funny-lee-mack>> [accessed 20 September 2016].

examines a joke told by the celebrated (and perhaps, in his way, paradigmatic) US stand-up comedian Lenny Bruce some time in the early 1960s. It goes like this:

If you've, er, [pause]
 Ever seen this bit before, I want you to tell me.
 Stop me if you've seen it. [long pause]
 I'm going to piss on you.⁷⁰

According to Limon, this joke elicited 'seventeen seconds of unanimous laughter' (Limon is listening to a recording of Bruce's performance on vinyl). As Limon notes, 'by any standards, this is an extraordinary laugh'.⁷¹ On paper, it does not look much like a joke. Why, then, does the audience at the Lenny Bruce gig find it so funny? Limon tests a few comic theories against it, calling upon the work of joke anthropologists, cognitive theorists, and folkloric discourse around the 'sacred clown'. Freudian 'joke work' seems the most promising, for in theme Bruce's joke is 'sexual and excremental and aggressive' all at once, 'almost too obliging a Freudian specimen'.⁷² What seems to emerge from such theorizing, Limon acknowledges, is the sense that Bruce's joke is a deliberate 'play on all such comic hermeneutics'.⁷³ The opener 'If you've ever seen this bit before, I want you to tell me' suggests that he may be about to tell a conventional joke, of the 'knock-knock' or 'man walks into bar' variety. It is a play on 'the ritual nature of the performance', lampooning the 'formal politeness of the occasion' by adopting the 'stop me if you've heard this one' shtick of the light entertainer, here to 'do a few talk bits'. But then, with the delivery of the punchline – 'I'm going to piss on you' – 'the formal politeness of the occasion is folded into the sordid violence of it'.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ John Limon, *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*, (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2000), p. 11.

⁷¹ And, it might be added, Bruce was an extraordinary comedian, widely credited as 'the man who single-handedly changed the very architecture of American comedy', the comedian who 'dared to speak the unspeakable' (Collins, 'Comedy and Liberty, p. 65) and was duly prosecuted for obscenity, and whose early death, in Lee's words, 'confirmed the sainthood on him' (*On Not Writing*, online video recording, YouTube, 3 July 2013, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrXVaytvJtQ>> [accessed 23 October 2013]).

⁷² Limon, p. 14.

⁷³ Limon, p. 15.

⁷⁴ Limon, p. 17.

'Joking is an all-male sport in Freud,' as Limon observes. And, thinking along these lines, it is men who *stand up* to piss, men hold their thing as they do so, and by this logic, stand-up can be figured as a sort of male pissing contest. In another part of his book, Limon takes it further: 'It would be difficult for the typical stand-up comedian to disavow the phallicness of his position,' he writes, 'standing above us, the stand-up comedian always seems larger than he, usually "he," is.'⁷⁵ And, if we are going to allow the phallus to intrude upon the proceedings, we may as well acknowledge that comedian Marjorie Gross is not the only person to have observed that standing onstage with a mic is 'like holding a penis'.⁷⁶ And Limon suggests that if 'controlling the mike, talking down to us' is having the phallus, this means, in Freudian terms, that penis envy ought to be redirected toward the microphone.⁷⁷ This phallic exposition is certainly suggestive as to why a man on a stage holding a microphone may be funny (i.e. he comes across as a bit of a dick). But this is also problematic, because in it suggests that the symbol, the word, and the fleshy presence of the penis have some sort of necessary significance: their coincidence (either in innuendo, in a theoretical model, in a moment of getting a joke) is taken as *meaningful*. Whereas, I argue, the funniness of this joke depends on a certain conventionality – both of language, and of the stand-up situation – which is not a matter of necessity, but of habit.

An alternative approach to this joke, and it is my preferred approach, calls into play the theories of Felman and Butler and foregrounds the conventionality of the utterance. For, in conventional terms, 'I'm going to piss on you' is a formulation that has something in common with a promise, or else a threat: it refers to an act in the future. As Butler notes, 'Implicit in the notion of a threat is that what is spoken in language may preconfigure what the body might do; the act referred to in the threat is the act that one might actually perform'. However, 'it would be a mistake to conclude that whereas the threat takes place merely in language, the threatened act takes place in a material instance fully beyond

⁷⁵ Limon, p. 108.

⁷⁶ Cited in Brodie, p. 57.

⁷⁷ Limon, p. 113.

language, between and among bodies'. Because, as Felman reminds us, *speaking itself is a bodily act*. So, 'Although the threat is not quite the act that it portends, it is still an act, a speech act, one that not only announces the act to come, but registers a certain force in language'.⁷⁸

For Bruce's utterance to have force, the audience does not need to believe Bruce is going to *actually* piss on them at some time in the future – they laugh at him *saying* it – the saying is already a *doing*. On what does this 'violence' of this act depend? Upon the fact that Bruce spoke *as if* they could 'stop' him, as if they had some say in the proceedings, before reminding them of the physical fact that, as the comedian, the one standing above the audience on a raised platform, he is the only one in a position to carry out such an act? If so, both the violence, and the funniness, of the punch line might have to do with the revelation of the conventionality of the situation. Bruce speaks *as if* engaging them in a two-way exchange that is, of course, no such thing. The punchline, such as it is, is a forceful reminder that they themselves are, in a bodily sense, exposed both to and by Bruce's address. Although this does not *resolve* the theoretical problem of the phallus, it does enable me to formulate a number of questions that help clarify the nature of my enquiry in this thesis: how is it that the figure or example of 'a man' can become funny *in* exemplarity? Why might certain performances of certain kinds of maleness be funny in particular socio-historical settings? If I find certain men's performance of a certain kind of *manness* funny, how do I begin to position myself in relation to that?

My response to these questions will come most clearly into focus in Chapter Four, but it is necessary to acknowledge, at the outset, the way that Lee persistently returns to not only toilet jokes, but exemplary scenes of urination. For example, as I will discuss in Chapter Two, he dedicates an early part of *Stand-Up Comedian* to an anecdote about 'doing a wee out of my cock' on the same day as the Al Qaeda terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre. Rather than being symptomatic of something deep and psychoanalytical, I suggest that we think of these as willfully distracting figures to which Lee returns in order to

⁷⁸ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, pp. 9-10.

stage questions about the politics of what it means to be standing, as a man, on a public stage, within a particular historical context, and make the claim that one is 'just joking'. I argue that the politics of 'just joking' concern how the right and power to draw the line between the serious and the non-serious (the light, the trivial, the funny) is claimed and enforced. It prompts us to ask: who controls, or attempts to control, the space of communication?

7. Figures of speech

Might the exemplary be bound up in the speechness of speech in a way that is comparable to joking? The introduction of an example can be flagged by the saying of 'Say...'. This signals that the example is merely hypothetical and provisional, merely a demonstration *for now*. It implies that the example might be improvised or spontaneous. Similarly, a wish is hypothetical, it refers to an alternative reality created by speech, by and in the act of speaking. And so for Lee to say, of Richard Hammond, 'I wish he *had died*' is for him to speak in an imagined past tense, expressed in the mood of the subjunctive. Sometimes called 'counterfactual', the subjunctive mood is a conditional tense, a departure into the realm of the 'what if...'. To say 'I wish...' signals an entry into the realm of hypothesis. An utterance like 'I wish...' thus blurs the boundaries between serious and non-serious by opening onto fiction – it is, after all, only in the presence of a fairy godmother or a genie that the words 'I wish...' acquire the (magical) power to effectuate something in the very moment of being spoken. But, even though, as adults, we know genies and fairy godmothers to be pure make-believe, we might well be moved to utter the superstitious cry of 'don't say that!' (the unspoken implication being '...because it might just come true').

Lee has spoken into being a parallel reality in which Richard Hammond *has* died. Then he adds detail. He appears to get a little carried away:

I wish, I wish his head had come off and rolled along the track, and all shards of metal had gone in his eyes and blinded him... And then I, then I wish his head had rolled into a still-burning pool of motor oil but there

was just enough sentience left in his spinal column for him to go, 'Ooh, that's hot', and then die.

If this hyperbolic, cartoonishly vivid depiction of Hammond's death is being elaborated *as an example*, then it might be said that Lee is doing so in order to *make an example* of Richard Hammond (and, historically, heads displayed on sticks have been used as a fairly visceral way of 'making an example' of someone). But the thing about examples – their risk, their danger – is that they make take on a life of their own. Like heads on sticks, they might continue to 'present' themselves long after they are welcome. In a footnote to his essay, 'The Epistemology of Metaphor', Paul de Man makes the following comment about examples:

Examples used in logical arguments have a distressing way of lingering on with a life of their own. I suppose no reader of J.L. Austin's paper 'On Excuses' has ever been quite able to forget the "case" of the inmate of the asylum parboiled to death by a careless guard.⁷⁹

Felman calls Austin's examples 'aberrantly trivial', and comments on the 'unexpectedness' of this incursion of something trivial, or in other cases somehow monstrous and absurd, into a supposedly 'serious' philosophical discourse. This is a *structural* model that coincides with the way that many jokes work: via the passage from great things to small (from generalized to trivial or irreducible). This transition (which has the violence of a slip or a fall) is played out in the switch between *registers of discourse*. And Austin's repeated invocations that we enjoy the process of theorizing, signals his pleasure in this failure (this failure to substantiate, demonstrate or prove). The way examples make theory collapse *is itself funny*.

On the subject of examples, de Man also has this to say:

From the experience of reading abstract philosophical texts, we all know the relief one feels when the argument is interrupted by what we call a

⁷⁹ Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 42.

‘concrete’ example. Yet at that very moment, when we think at last that we understand, we are further from comprehension than ever; all we have done is substitute idle talk for serious discourse.⁸⁰

Although (or, rather, *because*) it is not certain that de Man is being entirely serious when he writes this, de Man’s comments open onto something that is important for the mode and methodology of this study, that is, the potential – even the tendency – for examples to perform in ways that do not merely exemplify the conscious or intended statement of the text. Examples can demonstrate other than you are trying to ‘say’. This is a recurring sticking point, a point on which my scholarly practice gets stuck. It also is the mode by which this research has taken place. And so it explains something of the structure of this thesis, the way it undoes the conventional relation between object of enquiry and mode of enquiry, between case study and theoretical reading, between theory and practice.

This thesis is responsive to a number of examples or illustrations from theoretical texts that might be called ‘famous’: Austin’s marriage ceremony, Louis Althusser’s street scene, Karl Marx’s speaking commodities, de Man’s deconstruction of Archie Bunker’s ‘what’s the difference?’ Such examples have been described as ‘powerfully distracting’,⁸¹ both for their readers and, it seems, the authors who deployed them. They become objects of ‘evident fascination’⁸² or weird compulsion. If, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick comments in *Touching Feeling*, ‘the jokes you remember are the ones that don’t quite work’,⁸³ I would offer that the examples that spark conversation are the ones that don’t quite, or don’t only, exemplify.

In order to theorize this exemplary failing and overreaching, I am drawing an understanding of ‘the figure’ as it emerges in the work of de Man. In the

⁸⁰ Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 276.

⁸¹ Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 78.

⁸² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 4.

⁸³ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 3.

chapters that follow, I deploy the term ‘figure’ in three senses: firstly, as a rhetorical figure of speech associated with the literary richness of language (in this sense, I am using ‘figure’ in preference to ‘trope’); secondly, as an image or an illustrative example, and in this sense I am most interested in an *unruly* figures of the kind that fail or exceed their illustrative function. And thirdly, I understand figure to imply the author-figure whose status as this type of author (philosopher, stand-up comedian) is – perhaps inescapably – present in our reading of the work.

Chapter One, by exposing elements of Austin’s philosophical performance as a scene of speech (the giving of a lecture), highlights the various ways in which Austin was making an example of himself, of his own speaking body and his own exemplary acts of speech. This enables me to position my own work in relation to Austin’s *example* as a philosopher. This chapter raises the problem and possibility of examples as jokes. Chapter Two responds to a single joke, about a tea cosy. It asks to what extent the funniness of this joke has to do with the appeal of the tea cosy itself as a ‘cute’ anthropomorphic thing. An articulation is staged between stand-up comedy and literary theory, via the work of Stewart Lee and Paul de Man. In this chapter, I hope to demonstrate that an encounter between de Man’s deconstructive interventions in lyric poetry and the complex address structure of just one of Lee’s jokes is productive. Productive, that is, of more than just knowledge about Stewart Lee’s stand-up, or tea cosies, or how literary texts might be performed, but of how rhetoric – as persuasion and as imagery – shapes our social actions and appearances in a late capitalist world full of ‘things that talk’.

Chapter Three began as a historical study of the microphone as a performance object. But then, ‘for research purposes’, I watched a performance by the Italian group Kinkaleri, a performance that sparked in me feelings of recognition, longing and even love, a performance I found almost unbearably funny. In order to theorise this funniness, I engage a reading of Michael Fried’s famous description of minimalist sculpture as both ‘literalist’ and ‘theatrical’ to trace the genealogy of a certain set of terms within the discourse of modern and postmodern art and performance. This chapter stages the question of how to

write the experience of spectating into an academic text when that experience is necessarily partial, embodied and incongruously personal. In the end, my discussion in this chapter focuses not so much on speech, but rather its absence in a work of postmodern theatre: a work in which a microphone is onstage, and yet speech is, for the most part, withheld.

Chapter Four returns to the question of direct address, and to the scene of Stewart Lee's stand-up performance. It responds to Lee's 2005 show *90's Comedian*, focusing in particular on a moment in which Lee's body is being staged – or, put on display – by his speech. My focus on this chapter is less on how Lee's jokes 'work' than on how it feels to occupy (and, as it happens, *not quite occupy*) the position of Lee's spectator. Drawing on the work of Denise Riley, I model Lee's stand-up practice as having less to do with jokes than with a certain sort of interpellative address that, in some curious sense, *works by failing to work*.

Throughout, my theoretical interest in the rhetorical figure and the scene of address – the bodies and spaces that open within a text – means that my own text necessarily stages a series of links and displacements between the place of the performance and the place of the page. At best, I hope for the writing here to offer a number of thought mechanisms, vivid figurations or oddly not-quite-working examples that could start conversations within and across the discipline of performance, *about* the discipline of performance.

This thesis project works towards the observation that ethical deliberation, although it sounds distinctly unfunny, is not antithetical to the comic, or comedy. Rather, there is a distinctive and productive sort of ethics that emerges from the comic disjuncture and correspondence between speech and a body. What emerges from this disjuncture is named funniness, a feeling that is made up of a complex array of affects: identification, longing, discomfort, surprise, anxiety (both professional and political), guilt, relief, affirmation, and a feeling of pleasurable willing passivity. It asks to what extent these affects could be named as or understood to be linguistic, personal, historical, or political. It tests writerly methodologies to ask what kind of explanation might be possible. In so

doing, this thesis stages a discussion, and a practical negotiation, between the spoken and the written, the anecdotal and the theoretical, the theatrical and the performative, the serious and the trivial, and ends up moving closer to something that might be called ethical, discovering a potential ethics in the scene of speech that has been described and in the exemplary or figural mode.

CHAPTER 1

The philosopher onstage: J.L. Austin and performance studies

1. 'This guy'

'It was one of those over-determined moments in the life of a theatre academic.' So begins Shannon Jackson's *Professing Performance*, with an anecdotal retelling of a conversation that occurred over dinner at a professional theatre event. Jackson, as hired-in scholar, is sitting across from a director and dramaturg. The latter asks her to account for the academic trendiness of a word he seems, quite understandably, to think she might know a thing or two about: 'Isn't "performativity" the latest thing in "English" theory?' Jackson responds to this question with a stumbling attempt at casual explanation:

"Well," I began, dreading what would follow, "the concept of 'performativity' within literary studies is a reworking of the ideas of this guy, J.L. Austin... and he was, well a kind of philosopher... He wrote a book called *How to Do Things With Words*... and there he argued that words are not purely reflective... that linguistic acts don't simply reflect a world but that speech actually has the power to *make* a world."¹

This is met with casual assurance by the director who responds, simply (and some would say *simplistically*): 'Oh... you mean like theatre.' Jackson recounts her attempt to explain the theory of 'this guy' ('This guy, *this guy*...?') with a humorous self-deprecation. She observes her discomfort – 'I found myself staring at the table while I talked' – and reads this as characteristic of 'an awkward and emergent period in the study and practice of theatre and performance',² one that is due in large part to the 'intellectual ferment' that has in recent years come to surround performance, and its related 'P-words', across a range of academic disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.³ In this

¹ Jackson, p. 2.

² Jackson, p. 2.

³ Jackson, p. 4

chapter I will respond to the particular difficulties that attend that most troublesome of 'P-words', *performativity*. Taking Jackson's opening vignette as my cue, I am interested in the difficulties performance and theatre academics⁴ often seem to experience when attempting to account for the popularity of 'performativity' – an attempt that will often, and perhaps reluctantly, include recourse to the ideas of *this guy* J.L. Austin.

Definitional work on performativity tends to start with Austin; he is widely credited as the originator of the term 'performative', and its associated sub-field of 'speech-act theory'. A reference to his 1962 publication *How to Do Things With Words* is all but compulsory when attempting to open a discussion on the topic. When introducing the term, it is usually considered sufficient to acknowledge Austin with a brief nod to his conception of a 'performative utterance' – something like: 'an instance in which to say something is to *do* something' – most probably with a couple of examples, such as "I promise to...", "I name this ship...", or (perhaps most reliably) the marriage ceremony's "I pronounce you man and wife", before moving on. In this regard, Jackson's 'reductive but brief' encapsulation of Austin's work is neither unusual or particularly controversial. Austin's founding proposition remains, at best, persuasive and thought provoking. At the least, it is handy in its pithiness – what is, in the words of one academic, a nice 'carry-home concept'.⁵ However, the finer points of Austin's work are no longer very often discussed, at least not within performance and theatre studies (and certainly not over dinner). This may be due to a widespread sense that his 'foundational work' on performatives has been superseded by expositions that are more provocative, more developed, more influential, or more up-to-date. So why does Jackson consider the scene of her oddly uncomfortable resort to Austin's work significant enough to place at the beginning of her book-length study of the challenges facing performance and theatre studies in the new millennium? For her, it seems, this exchange is typical of the kind of 'bizarre and friction-ridden' conversation that

⁴ Although elsewhere she explains how the two terms can be sharply opposed by those working within the field, Jackson conflates theatre and performance here, and throughout her book. This reflects the disciplinary and institutional alignment of 'theatre and performance studies', which is why I am also conflating the two terms in this part of my discussion.

⁵ James Loxley, *Performativity* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 2.

goes on in performance studies – across the artist/scholar divide, across the performance/theatre divide, and between performance and theatre scholars and academics from other disciplines.⁶ In this chapter I will explore, specifically, the strange prominence of *this guy*, J.L. Austin, in Jackson's image of the predicament of the theatre academic. More broadly, I will ask: what kind of contribution has Austin's work on the performative utterance made to this awkward emergence of performance studies? Is John Langham Austin a figure that performance studies finds particularly awkward?

As will have now become clear, Jackson's extended study of the discourse of performance and theatre studies – its sticky moments, avoidances and impasses as much as its critical gains – provides a starting provocation and a recurring reference point for my discussion. In particular, I am interested in the awkwardness that Jackson describes feeling during her own attempt, in her capacity as a theatre academic, to account for the cross-disciplinary trendiness of a word that sounds like, but then again does not sound quite the same as, 'performance'. Performance and performativity are terms that have in recent years gained critical currency. It is even possible to speak of a 'performative turn' in the humanities and social sciences. As Jackson writes, in recent decades, 'scholars drawing from anthropology, sociology, art history, folklore, and media studies have developed vocabularies of performance to understand artefacts and events ranging from parades to television, from story-telling to religious ceremonies'.⁷ Since 'the aspects of performance that these scholars emphasise can be quite different', and even contradictory;⁸ when we talk about performance, we are not necessarily – or even usually – talking about the same thing.

Moreover, when scholars outside theatre and performance studies use the term 'performative', there is a good chance they explicitly, perhaps categorically, *do not mean theatre*. As Jackson signals in the opening pages of her book, in *How to Do Things With Words*, performativity's foundational text, Austin advances a categorical exclusion of theatre from his consideration of utterances made 'in

⁶ Jackson, p. 2

⁷ Jackson, p. 4

⁸ Jackson, p. 6

normal circumstances', describing theatrical language as 'hollow or void' and 'parasitic upon its normal use'.⁹ It is possible, on the basis of such comments, to assert – as Jackson does – that Austin 'argued against an alignment between speech-act theory and theatre'. In light of this, Jackson charges Austin with reproducing 'a neo-Platonic notion of derivativeness to add a kind of "anti-theatrical performativity" to the long list of anti-theatrical prejudices that have vexed Western intellectual history'.¹⁰ This is awkward indeed for Jackson and other theatre academics: as she implies, this 'conceptual opposition' between performativity and theatre is one installed, at the concept's origin, 'in the beginning', as it were, by Austin himself.

This account is broadly accepted: Austin asserted that a promise, bet, marriage, etc., if spoken by an actor on stage, would not be 'taken seriously' as a performative utterance, because it was merely an imitation of speech 'in normal circumstances'. Its performative action would therefore be 'void'. Theatrical speech is thus seen as a derivation of utterances made 'in real life', and as such is of little interest to a philosopher of 'ordinary language' such as Austin.¹¹ It is perhaps hardly surprising, then, that Jackson casts Austin as an antagonist at her already friction-ridden dinner table; as she asserts, 'the director's delightfully assured come back "like theatre" *would have been roundly contested by Austin himself*'.¹² It is for this reason that scholars within theatre and performance (and Jackson might well include herself in this) have been 'as suspicious of the language of performativity as they are intrigued by its theoretical potential'.¹³

How might we, as scholars of theatre and performance, go about overcoming

⁹ Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, p. 22.

¹⁰ Jackson, p. 3.

¹¹ According to its entry in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 'Ordinary Language Philosophy' names 'a certain kind of philosophy that flourished, mainly in Britain and therein mainly in Oxford, for twenty years or so, roughly after 1945', although the label 'was more often used by the enemies than by the alleged practitioners of what it was intended to designate' (Geoffrey Warnock, 'Ordinary Language Philosophy' in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 7 (1998), pp. 147-152 (p. 147)).

¹² Jackson, p. 4, emphasis added.

¹³ Jackson, p. 3

this suspicion in order to explore the critical potential performativity might hold? Why does the term remain so difficult, so daunting? If ‘performativity’ has, in the years since the 1962 publication of *How to Do Things With Words*, gained broad critical currency across disciplines, one result of this is that the word has acquired an array of different and quite conflicting meanings and uses. For example, for so-called ‘speech-act theorists’ such as John Searle, operating in the field of linguistic philosophy, ‘performative’ refers to a bounded and linguistically specific class of utterances. Whereas, for those working under the influence of the deconstruction of Jacques Derrida, or drawing upon Judith Butler’s influential theories of subjectivity, ‘performativity’ offers a wide-ranging, anti-essentialist view of human action in general. This latter intellectual lineage was particularly influential upon the development of gender studies and queer studies in the 1990s, both of which explored the political potential of a challenge to the classical model of linguistic reference found within Austin’s work: that language could be *constitutive*, rather than merely reflective of reality.

Jackson appears to be drawing primarily on the broad anti-essentialist legacy of Austin’s term when, at her awkward professional dinner, she characterizes the performative utterance in terms of its ability to ‘make a world’. The world-making power of words is, as the director’s response signals, something over which theatre makers may well feel they have some special claim. However, an assertion that performativity is ‘like theatre’ is liable to exasperate any scholar who is versed in the term’s critical history, a scholar like Jackson who is all too aware of the ‘conceptual opposition between theatre and performativity’ that is lodged within the theoretical concept at its origin. This is why, for Jackson, the discourse of performativity ‘exacerbates an occupational division between the artist and the academic’. Against this backdrop, Jackson reflects that the rise of ‘performativity’ has created something of a ‘disciplinary crisis’ for theatre and performance studies. However, she also locates a ‘disciplinary opportunity’ in the Austinian focus on ‘the addressive operations of speech’.¹⁴ In many ways, my work in this thesis project is all about pursuing this particular opportunity.

¹⁴ Jackson, p. 178.

Jackson takes the phrase 'performance studies' to refer specifically to 'scholarship and scholars that self-consciously composed a late twentieth-century intellectual formation', one she associates with an oft-quoted 'origin narrative'.¹⁵ This story involves Richard Schechner and his exchanges with anthropologist Victor Turner and a 'cohort of thinkers' at New York University, and its key moments include 'the avant-garde experimentation of the 1960s' which gave rise to what we now know as 'performance art', an emergence associated with New York. Add to that a NYU departmental name-change from 'Theater' to Performance Studies in 1980, and Schechner's now infamous call, in 1992, to look to new forms as a means of looking past the outmoded 'string quartet' that theatre had become.¹⁶ Necessarily simplified as this account is, it provides the broad strokes of a narrative that has, for many, underwritten the field of performance. A key limitation of this 'Schechner myth' is its insistence that 'performance' gains its legitimacy and identity primarily in opposition to 'theatre': an entrenchment of terms, performance as not-theatre. Jackson also usefully recounts a second, and lesser-known origin narrative. This story concerns the emergence of the Performance Studies Department at Northwestern. Unlike the Schechnerian 'East-Coast' version, this institutionalization of performance did not occur as a willful separation from, or opposition to, theatre. Instead, it emerged out of the pre-existing Department of Oral Interpretation, which has always been separate from theatre, and was hitherto 'most often positioned as an aesthetic subfield within Speech, Communication and/or Rhetoric'. In bringing this parallel narrative to attention, Jackson proposes we think about performance studies as 'the integration of theatrical and oral/rhetorical traditions'.¹⁷

In order to pursue these questions of speech and performance, it may first be necessary to overcome certain obstacles and obfuscations within the expanded discourse of performativity. Although for many it is synonymous with speech-act theory, the degree to which performativity could be described as primarily a theory *of speech*, or even language, is itself contested. Performativity is a

¹⁵ Jackson, p. 11.

¹⁶ Jackson, pp. 8-9.

¹⁷ Jackson, pp. 9-10.

concept that comes out of thinking about language, but whose application needn't be limited to verbal actions or practices. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a prominent theorist of anti-essentialist, queer performativity, writes:

That language itself can be productive of reality is a primary ground of anti-essentialist enquiry. To that degree, both deconstruction and gender theory seem to have an interest in unmooring Austin's performative from its localized dwelling in a few exemplary utterances... and showing it instead to be a property of language or discourse much more broadly. You could caricature Derrida as responding to Austin's demonstration of explicit performatives by saying, "But the only really interesting part of it is how all language is performative"; and Judith Butler as adding, "Not only that, but it's most performative when its performativity is least explicit – indeed, arguably, most of all when it isn't even embodied in actual words."¹⁸

Arguably, this has added to the confusion that can attend its usage, particularly in settings that are interdisciplinary. In the final chapter of *Professing Performance*, Jackson argues that the theatre/performativity problem highlights 'a larger set of genealogical tensions and obfuscations' between theatre/performance studies and language-centered disciplines such as 'English theory', linguistics, and rhetoric.¹⁹ She suggests that 'thinking about theatrical production and reception through the addressive operations of speech' means joining 'rhetorical and dramatic legacies that became disconnected from each another in the United States over the course of the past 100 years'.²⁰

At this juncture it becomes necessary to acknowledge the geographical divide between Jackson's perspective and my own. The institutional and disciplinary genealogies of speech/performance that Jackson traces are specifically North American, and the place of Rhetoric and Speech within these institutions is specific to that context. Jackson herself holds academic posts in Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies and Rhetoric.²¹ For Jackson, the stakes of working through the theatre/performativity conundrum concern 'the chance for a

¹⁸ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁹ Jackson, p. 178.

²⁰ Jackson, p. 216.

²¹ As previously noted, currently at the University of California, Berkeley.

different kind of reunion between theatre and rhetoric', suggesting that in the United States, the doubtful place of the theatrical in Austinian theory is bound up with a specific awkwardness between academic disciplines: as she notes, Speech and Theatre are 'two words that still hang unhappily next to each other above the stone entrances of several university departments'.²² Against this, it might be offered that, in the United Kingdom, the two words that are most likely to hang in unhappy proximity above university departments dealing in theatre are 'Drama' and 'Performance'. In the United Kingdom, Speech or Rhetoric have never had an institutional footing comparable to that they have enjoyed in the USA. At this point, I can do little more than acknowledge this contextual difference; my enquiry in this chapter is concerned less with institutional history than with the discursive complexity that surrounds the terms 'performance' and 'performativity' in their situated usage. In this chapter I will consider the possible displacements and subtle shifts in tone that result from temporal, geographical and disciplinary crossings – not only of concepts, approaches and critical buzzwords, but also of bodies, vocal inflections, and jokes.

The question of a geographical and institutional divide between the USA and UK, particularly regarding the question of Speech (that is, both Speech capital 'S' and small 's' speaking,) is also something I suggest we keep in mind when we start to consider how Austin *himself* figures in, and is figured by, the various accounts of his work. Again, it is Jackson's work in *Professing Performance* that has led me down this line of thinking, in demonstrating how the *discourse* of performance is itself *performed*. In other words, Jackson usefully alerts us to how the discursive dynamics of the discipline are played out over dinner tables, in classrooms, lecture theatres, rehearsal rooms and conference centre foyers, and how these scenes of (often awkward) conversation, explanation and chit-chat are, for all their apparent triviality, worthy of critical attention. Responding, with a degree of license, to Jackson's invitation to think through these scenes, I have begun to reflect on the way J.L. Austin is figured – that is, presented as a 'figure' – by Jackson's opening vignette. An influential figure, a figure within philosophy; a figure at the dinner scene. Jackson's Austin, '*this guy*', as she

²² Jackson, pp. 216-7.

refers to him, is an obstructive figure; unavoidably *there*, he is not exactly helping the rapprochement between academics and practitioners. Perhaps this is because he comes across as, at best, somewhat pedantic, at worst, high-handed – dismissive of theatre, roundly critical of the director's straightforwardness, dogmatically pursuing an agenda Jackson describes as 'neo-Platonic'.²³

What is Austin even doing here, in this, the paradigmatically awkward scene of the specifically, situatedly North American emergence of performance studies? As Jackson's study usefully reminds us, the set of practices known as 'performance' originated in the United States, and more specifically in New York, in the 1960s.

This is, as Jackson acknowledges, a necessarily reductive 'origin story'. As such it is simplified through re-telling, and centers on a few memorable and supposedly pivotal moments and characters: Richard Schechner making his iconoclastic pronouncement about a string quartet; Michael Fried in a dimly-lit room, getting disconcerted by a sculpture. Jackson quotes Peggy Phelan's wry assessment of the Schechnerian origin story, the one that centers on his interactions with anthropologist Victor Turner, as an intriguing moment in which 'two men gave birth'.²⁴ In light of this (and again, with a degree of license), we might think of the 'origin story' of performativity as one in which one man, J.L. Austin, 'gave birth'. Jackson implies Austin can be cast as the 'originator' not only of performativity, but of 'the theatre/performativity conundrum', the one that generates much of the awkwardness she identifies as inherent to the emergence of performance – as both discourse and discipline – in the United States since the 1960s (if we take this seriously, we might even begin to think Austin gave birth to a monster).

All this bizarre talk of birth is a reminder that the idea of 'origin', or indeed of an 'originator' – of a term, idea, concept – is tricky, but nevertheless stubborn. It might be said that a key element of the project of deconstruction and

²³ Jackson, p. 3.

²⁴ Jackson, p. 8

poststructuralist thought is precisely to debunk these origin myths. A key element of Jackson's project in *Professing Performance* is working-through of the implications of this intellectual lineage, these 'masculinist origin stories' for performance and theatre studies.²⁵ By drawing attention to specific exchanges in various rooms, the odd feelings that go along with them, what Jackson is doing is offering a decentered, heterogeneous narrative of the discipline and its discourse. The risk of it is that it reifies these scenes as new 'origin moments' – minor ones, dispersed ones, but origin moments all the same: performance and theatre studies as a series of little performances, vividly felt, sometimes contradictory, but so tempting, in the re-telling, to link together into a cause-effect narrative. And, as we know, theatre is itself concerned with stories. Perhaps this is the methodological paradox of trying to do poststructuralist work in performance and theatre studies: as scholars and makers of performance, we may well have a powerful inclination towards, or indeed a professional interest in, the belief that the most important moments involve bodies doing things in rooms, and we like telling stories about them. But theory has taught us to be skeptical of a yearning for encounter, for originary moments, for unmediated presence.

Having acknowledged the possible hazard, or pleasure, of this paradox, I hope in this chapter to offer some unexpected ways of working with it. In so doing, I will argue that although Austin's status as 'originator' of performativity is generally accepted, by accepting it with little more than a dutiful nod, we are missing something crucial about a philosopher whose work incessantly questioned, and invited questions as to, its own entitlement, its own philosophical authority. And, crucially, that Austin's work staged this questioning with and through the (speaking, professing) figure of J.L. Austin himself.

2. Reading and not reading

Given the subsequent broad critical currency of the term 'performativity', it tends

²⁵ Jackson, p. 25.

to be thought of as a concept that has overreached – if not entirely transcended – the intellectual, disciplinary and socio-historical context in which it was developed. But what happens if we furnish the ‘origin myth’, such as it is, of Austinian performativity with a little more detail? In particular, what might be of interest in the fact that its ‘foundational text’ was originally spoken, that is, performed, as a series of lectures?

J.L. Austin delivered the twelve lectures that would later be published as *How to Do Things With Words* at Harvard University in 1955. His thoughts on this topic had been developed in the preceding years, for a course called ‘Words and Deeds’ that Austin taught at Oxford University, where he held the chair of Whites Professor of Moral Philosophy between 1952 and his death in 1960. A philosopher who ‘wrote little and published less’, much of Austin’s influence within his lifetime was ‘through teaching and other forms of small-scale engagement with philosophers’.²⁶ *How to Do Things With Words* records what was probably one of Austin’s biggest gigs – at Harvard, delivering the latest in the series of prestigious William James lectures. The text was reconstructed from Austin’s own notes and those made by the students who attended his lectures, and published two years after his death in 1962.

According to several accounts, Austin’s appearance at Harvard was far from warmly received. Although his first lecture drew a substantial audience, the last was attended by ‘a core of some twelve to fifteen souls’ and ‘not all of these few were happy’.²⁷ Paul de Man, then a junior fellow at Harvard, is said to have offhandedly remarked that ‘a somewhat odd and quirky Oxford don was giving a series of dull and fairly inscrutable lectures’.²⁸ In light of this, we might reflect on the disciplinary problems, impasses, and crises that Jackson tacitly attributes to Austin himself. How we might begin to appreciate the inevitable mistranslations and misappropriations that must attend any ‘influential’ scholarly

²⁶ Guy Longworth, ‘John Langshaw Austin’, in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/austin-jl/>> [accessed 17 September 2016].

²⁷ Stanley Cavell, *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), p. 30. Cited in Loxley, p. 6.

²⁸ J. Hillis Miller, *Speech Acts in Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 61. Cited in Loxley, p. 6.

performance? And when I write ‘appreciate’ I mean it both in the sense of ‘acknowledge’ and ‘enjoy’. This is to ask: what if Austin’s oddness and his quirkiness were, rather than obstacles to a fuller understanding of his work, actually the key to it? Recall, it is Austin’s apparent dismissal of the theatrical utterance as ‘non-serious’ that rankles with Jackson, who is out to highlight anti-theatrical prejudice as it inheres within the discipline of theatre and performance studies. However, when it is spoken and when it is being applied to speech, this word, ‘serious’, and its various prefixes and suffixes brings with a slew of contradictions: ‘Seriously?’ ‘I’m serious!’ ‘Are you serious?’ ‘We take this matter seriously’. It is my contention that this word ‘serious’ is bound up in contradictory ways with the possibility that one’s speech, one’s intention in speaking, will be misunderstood. In light of this, I argue that a reappraisal of Austin’s philosophical *performance* – including his ‘manner of speaking’ – is a promising way of re-approaching the conundrum that his work represents for performance scholars.

What kind of claim am I making here? Am I to argue that Jackson has misunderstood Austin? That she has misread, or failed to thoroughly or adequately read Austin’s work? No. In order to overcome the supposed ‘conceptual opposition’ between theatre and performativity, I do not propose to ‘correct’ Jackson’s, or anyone else’s, reading of Austin’s work. Rather, my effort in this chapter has, increasingly, emerged as that of questioning the *way* we read (or, as it may be, fail to read) so-called ‘theoretical’ texts, perhaps especially those that have canonical or foundational status. More specifically, my work in the pages that follow consists in challenging the way theorist-authors are figured by the scholarly ‘Readings’ that remain central to the professional practice of academia in the humanities. Rather than offer a re-Reading (big R, noun) of Austin that would renew and strengthen his place in the origin story of performativity, my aim here is to demonstrate how reading Austin (small r, verb) – and more specifically, reading Austin *with pleasure* – reveals performativity to be a concept, a way of doing things, that destabilizes the ground that supports both origin stories *and* theoretical concepts.

In this chapter, then, I hope to both test out and make the case for a

methodology of reading that might best be described as *reading with pleasure*, and most specifically reading *Austin* with pleasure. In so doing, I am responding to the provocation and the invitation I find in the work of Shoshana Felman, and particularly in her book *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*. Originally published in French in 1980, when she was teaching French and Comparative Literature at Yale University,²⁹ Felman's reading of Austin goes against the grain of both speech-act theory and the Derridean, deconstructionist treatment of performativity. As Stanley Cavell writes, in his Foreword to the 2002 edition, Felman's text 'has never found the full radius of readers it assumes and deserves' due to certain 'disciplinary points of resistance'.³⁰ Felman situates her encounter with Austin at the convergence of philosophy, linguistics, literary theory and psychoanalysis. In a reading that is bold, playful and, to adopt a favourite term of Felman's, 'scandalous' (or, in Cavell's words, 'philosophically strictly impertinent'³¹), Felman reads Austin 'with' the dramatic (or 'mythical') character of Don Juan, the arch seducer of Molière's seventeenth-century play. That is not to say that she offers a straightforwardly 'Austinian' reading of a work of literature. It might rather be observed that Felman offers a Don Juanian reading of Austin's theoretical writing, and of Austin himself, who she refers to repeatedly as a 'Don Juan figure'.

Felman's work in this book has formed a departure point for my own reading, rather than a script for it. Indeed, her recurrent references to Don Juan and her admission that 'I had better declare at once that I am *seduced* by Austin'³² were, initially, elements of her reading that I strongly resisted. I did not, after all, wish to be 'seduced' by the man who 'gave birth' to performativity. However, I was (and remain) intrigued, and persuaded, by Felman's further declaration that:

I like not only the openness that I find in [Austin's] theory, but the theory's

²⁹ *Le Scandale du corps parlant: Don Juan avec Austin, ou, la seduction en deux langues* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980). The first English edition (translated by the author) was published in the USA by Cornell University Press in 1983.

³⁰ Stanley Cavell, 'Forward' in Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, p. xi.

³¹ Cavell in Felman, p. xii.

³² Felman, p. 48.

potential for scandal; I like not only what he says, but what he ‘does with words.’ And it is the import of this *doing* (as distinct from the saying, from the simple theoretical statement) that I want now to articulate. After having done things with what he says, I shall try to say what he does. To say what he does *with* what he says...³³

I do not intend to merely repeat, paraphrase or report upon Felman’s reading. Instead, I take it as a provocation, an example. In so doing, I draw on Felman’s *example* as a reader, a reader of male writers considered ‘foundational’ with relation to influential theories and discourses, who have taken their place within those masculinist origin stories. Felman is a woman reader who acknowledges her own act of reading as both embodied and positioned, but not foreclosed by either of those things. Felman lays out this ‘ethics of interpretation’ in what is arguably her most influential book, *What Does a Woman Want?* Here she describes her effort in terms of ‘the priority of practice’. She advocates ‘being careful never to foreclose or to determine in advance the reading process’, either by the imperative to be critical, the impulse to resist the ideological operations of the text, or to get from the text the affirmation of a theory one already holds. For is not reading powerful precisely because it is ‘a rather risky business whose outcome and full consequences can never be known in advance’? For Felman, the possibility of reading inheres in ‘the one risk that, precisely, cannot be resisted: that of finding in the text something one does not expect’, which has to do with the ‘never quite predictable potential of *surprise*’.³⁴

Felman thus invites/incites me to lay myself open to the potential surprise of reading, to approach it as a practice whose outcome is not foreclosed – either by the canonical status of the text or the critical status of the author, by influential ‘readings’ by other scholars, or even by my own impulse to overturn those readings. Working under this aim, I will argue that overcoming the sense that Austin is a problem for performance studies (i.e. that theatrical performance was a problem Austin was not willing to address) requires a challenge to the

³³ Felman, p. 48.

³⁴ Shoshana Felman, *What Does A Woman Want?: Reading and Sexual Difference* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 5-6.

way theory and practice are habitually delineated – both within performance studies and more generally. My undertaking here is to demonstrate the risk that the pleasure of reading brings is that it destabilizes the ‘ground’ on which performativity is claimed to be either a technical linguistic, or a properly ‘theoretical’ concept. Thus I consider what Austin’s famous explication of performativity is *doing*, as distinct from what it is saying, from its (supposedly) simple theoretical statement. More broadly, I argue against the idea of a ‘correct Reading’, one that aims to extract a technical result, as that which denies the pleasures and peculiarities of reading as a time-bound, embodied process.

3. Austin’s impasse

In this section, I will trace the main moments in the critical reception of Austin’s work, and delineate the various ways in which these responses make it feel possible, or preferable, to avoid reading Austin – or at least avoid the risk of reading Austin for pleasure. My overarching aim in this section is to show how various influential interpretations of Austin’s work cause problems for performance studies, and demonstrate how approaches that reinforce a division between ‘practice’ and ‘theory’ are particularly unhelpful for performance studies as it approaches the question of speech.

As I have already indicated, the lectures later published as *How to Do Things With Words* were developed, originally, for a course called ‘Words and Deeds’ that Austin taught at Oxford. Austin had been cultivating an approach that had been identified as ‘ordinary language philosophy’, which can be understood as motivated by a distaste for the lofty idealism of logical positivism, which for some time had been the dominant movement in Anglophone philosophy. However, Austin makes only an oblique reference to the philosophical backdrop of his work in the first lecture of *How to Do Things With Words*, when he describes what he is about to do as part of a ‘recent movement towards questioning an age-old assumption in philosophy’, the assumption being that ‘to say something... is always and simply to *state* something... at least in all cases

worth considering'.³⁵ This 'age-old assumption' was certainly perpetuated and enforced by logical positivism, which confidently proclaimed 'the nonsense, or meaninglessness, of "value judgments" (utterances it held to be strictly meaningless *because* neither true nor false)'.³⁶

At the outset, then, Austin gathers a handful of examples – instances that, he asserts, cannot be judged on the basis of truth or falsity, but that could by no means be called nonsense. 'I promise...', 'I bequeath...', 'I bet...', 'I name this ship...', 'I sentence you...', and perhaps most famously: "I do" (take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife), as uttered in the course of a marriage ceremony.' Austin points out that 'in saying these words we are *doing* something – namely, marrying, rather than *reporting* something, namely *that* we are marrying.' (13). He names this category of utterances that are not statements 'performative', commenting that this name is derived, 'of course, from "perform" the usual verb with the noun "action": it indicates that the issuing of an utterance is the performing of an action – it is not normally thought of as just saying something' (6). At this early stage he identifies the performative, in contrast to what he calls 'constative' – statements that can be and customarily are judged on the basis of their correspondence to reality.

Two features of Austin's mode of theorizing are worth noting at this point. Firstly, he sets about undercutting philosophy's 'age-old assumption' by *example* rather than argument. As I will go on to demonstrate, the exemplary, the saying of examples, is of central importance to what it is that Austin is *doing* with words. Secondly, Austin freely acknowledges that his 'isolation of the performative' is merely 'provisional', and 'subject to revision in the light of later sections' (4). And indeed, when he sets out to find a linguistic or grammatical criterion by which the performative/constative division might be guaranteed, his theorizing, by his own admission, reaches an 'impasse' (59). There are grammatical criteria that *seem* promising – for example, many of the most explicit or obvious examples of performative utterances feature a verb in the

³⁵ Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, p. 12. Subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically within the text.

³⁶ Cavell, 'Foreword to *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*', p. xviii.

first-person present indicative active mood (“I *promise...*”, “I *bet...*”). However, it is possible to identify numerous exemplary utterances that perform actions without the need of such a verb: as Austin points out, in practice, an utterance like ‘Go away!’ does the same job as the performative ‘I *order* you to leave’. And, according to that logic, many supposedly ‘constative’ utterances, statements of ‘fact’ – such as ‘there is a bull in the field’ – in practice, do the same job as performative utterances. ‘There is a bull in the field’ might function as a warning, and as such imply the elided performative verb: ‘[I *warn* you that] there is a bull in the field’. For that matter, even a statement could be thought of as implying a performative verb: ‘I inform you that...’, ‘I state that...’. As soon as we acknowledge the possibility of these *elided* performative verbs, it becomes very difficult to maintain a clear boundary between speech in its performative and its constative function. Having thus failed to find ‘any *single simple* criterion of grammar and vocabulary’ to guarantee the distinction between performative and constative (59), Austin surmises that, when we ‘loosen up our ideas of truth and falsity’, there is not, in fact, a very clear distinction between performative utterances and other supposedly ‘constative’ statements, which are ‘speech acts no less than all these other speech acts that we have been mentioning and talking about as performative’ (249). And so, in his fifth lecture, Austin abandons the performative/constative binary, declaring it untenable. What he proposes instead is a general theory of performativity: speech as such is comprised precisely *of* acts, rather than statements. On this basis, it might be said that across the first four lectures, Austin proceeds to demonstrate, via slow, meticulous steps, the non-viability of his initial theoretical distinction, that between performative and constative utterances. It is in the fifth lecture that his theorizing, by his own admission, reaches the ‘impasse’ (59), whereupon he reflects, ‘I must explain again that we are floundering here. To feel the firm ground of prejudice slipping away is exhilarating, but it brings its revenges’ (61).

The most influential responses to Austin can be differentiated by their understanding of this self-declared ‘impasse’, which Austin equates, at least on a metaphorical level, with a loss of firm ground. Firstly, to a number of prominent American philosophers of language – most notably Searle but also H.P. Grice and Jerold J. Katz – Austin’s theory remains promising in spite of

what they consider to be the flaws of his taxonomic work. In broad terms, such thinkers consider Austin's failures to arise from his tendency to undermine his own findings by amassing counter-examples, and displaying attentiveness to the anomalous that borders on the excessive. Such theorists consider themselves as Austin 'inheritors' and as such have a responsibility to improve his work, or as Katz puts it in the title of a chapter, 'save Austin from Austin',³⁷ by reinstating the constative/performative distinction. For many speech-act theorists, this has also entailed working with Austin's exclusion of so-called 'fictional utterances', and attempting to 'complete' his work by determining the logical status of such utterances. This project involves both correction and extension of the taxonomic work Austin began. For these theorists, the performative is useful inasmuch as it offers a *basis* for linguistic analysis, and so they set about firming up the distinctions that ground it.

For Derrida, in his influential response to Austin in 'Signature Event Context' (1977), Austin's failure to find 'any single simple criterion' to demarcate a performative utterance is no accident. As already noted, Derrida's response could be caricatured as: 'But the only really interesting part of it is how all language is performative'. Beyond this, however, Derrida reads in Austin's work a deliberate and welcome challenge to what he calls 'linguisticism': 'I should say that it is this critique of linguisticism and of the authority of the code, a critique based on an analysis of language, that most interested and convinced me in Austin's undertaking'.³⁸ He praises Austin's analysis as 'patient, open, aporetic, in constant transformation, often more fruitful in the acknowledgement of its impasses than its positions'.³⁹ However, Derrida's influential reading of Austin's work is more famous as a critical deconstruction of what he reads as the latter's dogmatic adherence to a metaphysics of presence. Derrida charges Austin with promoting a theory of speech that requires the conscious intention of the speaking subject, present for the duration of the utterance. Potentially undermining instances of language use,

³⁷ Jerold J. Katz, 'How to Save Austin from Austin' in *Propositional Structure and Illocutionary Force* (New York: Cromwell, 1977).

³⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 19.

³⁹ Derrida, p. 14.

those that lack the authorizing presence of conscious intention, Austin excludes as 'non-serious'. For Derrida, Austin thus perpetuates Western intellectual history's centuries-old privileging of speech over writing.

If Austin's critical legacy is customarily talked about in dualistic terms, this is in large part because, in the late 1970s, Derrida's reading of Austin sparked a vigorous public disagreement with Searle. As a result of their heated exchanges, which represent 'one of the most notorious spats of recent critical times',⁴⁰ Austin's work became the object of a bitter disagreement about two opposing or (supposedly) mutually incompatible styles of thought – Continental versus Analytical, French versus Anglo-American, linguistic philosophy versus so-called 'Theory'.⁴¹ In her 2002 book *Touching Feeling*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that a full appreciation of Austin's concept of performativity requires a step to the side of not only the Searle/Derrida spat, but also the broad anti-essentialist account of performativity so powerfully developed by Judith Butler and others. In one sense, Derrida's and Butler's performativities can be cast in opposition to the 'hypostatized grammatical taxonomies' of Searle et al.'s 'positivistic uses' of Austin's theory. However, as I will demonstrate in the following section, Derrida's deconstruction of Austin requires the latter's syntactic taxonomies' to persist as 'reductively essentializing', when they were originally 'both productive and playful'. Furthermore, the fact that 'the move from *some* language to *all language* seems required by the anti-essentialist project' means that such accounts necessarily miss the nuances of 'particular bits of language', and the particularity and peculiarity of what Austin was himself *doing* with words. Sedgwick's suggestion of a 'step to the side of the deconstructive project'⁴² has opened up a space for my own efforts to listen for the nuances of what Austin had to say about theatre. In the pages that

⁴⁰ Loxley, *Performativity*, p. 1. As Loxley recounts, this disagreement was played out across the pages of a number of publications, with pot shots still being fired into the 1990s. Searle's various replies to Derrida's *Limited Inc.* can be read in 'Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida', *Glyph* 1 (1977), 198-208; 'The World Turned Upside Down', *New York Review of Books*, 30 (1983), 74-79; and 'Literary Theory and its Discontents', *New Literary History*, 25 (1994), 535-58.

⁴¹ See, for example, Reed Way Dasenbrock (ed.), *Redrawing the Lines: Analytic Philosophy, Deconstruction and Literary Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

⁴² Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 6.

follow, I will listen to Austin, closely, and – as the chapter moves to its conclusion – tune in particularly to the odd and almost universally overlooked things he *did* with the example and metaphor of the theatrical utterance.

4. Derrida's Austin – avoiding the ditch

Austin's most oft-repeated comments on the theatrical utterance occur during the second lecture reprinted in *How To Do Things With Words*:

I mean, for example, the following: a performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow and void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem or spoken in a soliloquy. [...] Language in such circumstances is in special ways – intelligibly – used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use ... (22)

These comments are often read as an extension of the following, from the first lecture, when Austin is reflecting on how 'simply' saying the words 'I promise...' could be thought to enact the *act* of promising:

Surely the words must be spoken 'seriously' and so as to be taken 'seriously'. This is, though vague, true enough in general – it is an important commonplace in discussing the purport of any utterance whatsoever. I must not be joking, for example, nor writing a poem. (9)

In both of the above citations, the question of speaking, or using language 'seriously', appears to be the subject of fairly hurried acknowledgement on Austin's part, one that is accompanied by a brief, perhaps cursory, list of examples – in the first: the speech of an actor onstage, a poem, a spoken soliloquy; in the second: joking and writing a poem. On the basis of these examples, it has been accepted that, in effect, Austin established the non-serious as a broad 'category', the paradigmatic examples of which were written poetry, theatrical performance, and joking. Indeed, in spite of their differences, both 'sides' of the Austin debate accept that Austin drew a central and defining distinction of this kind between 'speaking seriously' (a primary utterance, spoken in 'normal circumstances') and utterances that can be considered 'non-

serious', of which the theatrical utterance remains (merely) the handiest example. In the Austin-Derrida-Searle-Derrida exchanges, the theatrical utterance is invoked, in passing, as an example of what is *not* being discussed, then of what is problematically excluded, and then of what is wrongly included in a list of what is problematically excluded.

But what of joking? If Austin is excluding theatre from his enquiry, it follows that he must also be excluding joking. And this seems like an odd thing for Austin, a philosopher committed to an examination of the kind language people use in ordinary circumstances, to do. For, although certain kinds of set-piece jokes might seem to share qualities, in the delivery, with a dramatic soliloquy or indeed the recital of a poem, there is another, vaguer and more dispersed kind of joking that can overtake everyday, conversational speech. Indeed, the thing with joking is that you might not be able to tell, at least at the time, *whether or not* something is a joke. Someone might say something apparently serious only to claim, after the fact, to have been 'only joking!'. And then, of course, there is the problem of whether or not we believe them. The cry of 'only joking!' might be uttered with suave knowingness. Or it might be garbled hurriedly, in panicked mitigation: 'I didn't *mean* it! It was just a joke!' Does Austin mean to exclude *all* of these instances of language use from his study?

Further to this confusion, there is another terminological oddity that attends the supposed 'category' of the non-serious, one that might well be a sticking point for directors and dramaturgs and performance academics alike: how is it that soliloquies (so often tragic) and jokes or joking (so often, we hope, comic) have *both* fallen into the category of the 'non-serious'? We're caught here between the theatrical *genre* of tragedy and the everyday, dispersed instances of lightheartedness, sarcasm, mockery or – more dangerous – uncertain intention. A number of Austin's 'inheritors', most notably Searle, have attempted to resolve this problem by developing a speech-act theory of the 'fictional' or 'literary' utterance.⁴³

⁴³ Searle's solution is to suggest an imitative theory of literary speech acts, according to which the writer of a novel does not perform a distinct speech act of 'writing a novel', but is 'pretending, one could say, to make an assertion, or acting as if she were making an assertion,

However, under Felman's influence, I argue that what this problem requires is *not* a logic-based theory of fictional utterance, but rather, a rethinking of the central – and disruptive – role of joking in Austin's own theory. For, as Felman argues:

not only the eminently critical 'continental' reception but also the eminently admiring and accepting Anglo-Saxon one [...] have failed to grasp the purport of his *humorous performance*.⁴⁴

When Austin's own predilection for joking, his own *non-seriousness*, is taken into account, it becomes possible to propose that when Austin made his comments about 'speaking seriously', he was not, himself, speaking entirely seriously. This proposition, although it may at first appear to be flippant, a question of Austin's style rather than the substance of his theory, in fact – as I shall demonstrate – has far-reaching epistemological implications, which, as we shall see, take a fair bit of working through. At the far side of this work lies the possibility for rethinking the relationship between the theatrical and the performative. First of all, though, it is necessary to examine the finer points of the supposed serious/non-serious distinction as it emerges, and becomes established, within Derrida's influential deconstruction of Austin.

5. 'Signature Event Context' (Derrida takes Austin seriously)

It is largely on the basis of certain passages from Austin's second lecture that it has been possible to accuse him of excluding the theatrical utterance as secondary, parasitical and non-serious. In 'Signature Event Context', Derrida focuses in particular on the passage that contains Austin's now-famous references to the theatrical utterance as a 'hollow and void' example of language used 'not seriously', but '*parasitic* upon its normal use'. Derrida reads

or going through the motions of making an assertion, or imitating the making of an assertion', in Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 65. For further examples of speech act theories of literature, see David Fishelov, *Metaphors of Genre: The Role of Analogies in Genre Theory* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), pp. 119-153.

⁴⁴ Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, p. 96, emphasis added.

the passage in question as the second of two gestures of exclusion by which Austin demarcates his scheme for the 'smooth' or 'happy' functioning of a performative (14). It is necessary to gain a sense of what is included in scheme in order to understand the full import Derrida draws from Austin's subsequent exclusions. I will therefore briefly summarize this key part of the lecture before moving onto what Derrida might describe as 'the offending paragraph'.

In his scheme, Austin tabulates the 'appropriate circumstances' necessary for an explicit performative, such as a marriage ceremony, to successfully carry out its action. He divides these criteria into two major classes: (A.1) to (B.2) are contextual factors such as '(A.2) the particular persons and circumstances must be appropriate'; '(B.1) the procedure must be executed... both correctly and (B.2) completely'. Then, labeled with the Greek letter (Γ), are two further conditions relating to 'thoughts, feelings and intentions' that the participants in certain performative procedures 'must in fact have' (15). Austin acknowledges that there is considerable difference between the two *kinds* of criteria, which is signaled by his use of both Roman and Greek letters. Via a footnote, Austin also signals that the complications arising from his inclusion of thoughts, feelings and intentions will be considered forthwith ('It will be explained later why the having of thoughts, feelings and intentions is not included as just one among other "circumstances" already dealt with'). For Derrida, however, this offers evidence enough that Austin is reaching toward 'an exhaustively definable context... the teleological jurisdiction of an entire field whose organizing center remains *intention*'.⁴⁵

In Derrida's analysis, Austin's reliance on the organizing presence of a conscious intention is compounded by what follows: having established the scheme (which is, characteristically, emphasized as 'provisional'), Austin asks 'how complete is this classification?' (18). He then goes into detail about what he is *not* including in his considerations – factors that would automatically render an explicit performative (such as a promise or vow of marriage) ineffectual, doubtful or void. Firstly, he acknowledges that, as actions, like all

⁴⁵ Derrida, p. 15.

actions, performatives can be rendered 'unsatisfactory' by 'factors reducing or abrogating the agent's responsibility':

I mean that actions in general (not all) are liable, for example, to be done under duress, or by accident, or owing to this or that variety of mistake, say, or otherwise unintentionally... (21)

Having acknowledged this possibility, Austin clarifies: 'we are not including this kind of unhappiness' (21). This is what Derrida names as 'the first exclusion'. Emphasizing the recurrence of *intention* as the authorizing criterion of the performative, Derrida's essay then moves on to consider what he now calls 'the second case of this exclusion',⁴⁶ and cites the following passage from Austin in full:

(ii) Secondly, as *utterances* our performatives are *also* heir to certain other kinds of ill which infect all utterances. And these likewise, though again they can be brought into a more general account, we are deliberately at present excluding. I mean, for example, the following: 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 a soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance – a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways – intelligibly – used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use – ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language. All this we are *excluding* from consideration. Our performative utterances, felicitous or not, are to be understood as issued in ordinary circumstances (21-22).⁴⁷

In his analysis of this passage, Derrida draws attention not only to Austin's gesture of exclusion, but also to the vocabulary Austin uses to characterize that which he is excluding, by pulling out the following words: the 'non-serious', 'parasitism', 'etiolation', 'the non-ordinary'. The connotations of these descriptors are, for Derrida, telling. With the phrase 'the etiolations of language', Austin reveals his privileging of co-called 'serious' speech. The unusual word, 'etiolated', originally a botanical term, connotes a plant that is 'pale and weak

⁴⁶ Derrida, p. 16.

⁴⁷ All emphases as in original text, unless otherwise stated.

due to lack of light'. In its more generalized usage it means 'having lost vigour or substance; feeble'.⁴⁸ Derrida flags this word; for him, Austin's usage of it appears to suggest that he thinks of serious utterance as, effectively, *invigorated* by 'a free consciousness present to the totality of the operation'.⁴⁹ Serious speech is thus 'full' of intention, unlike non-serious utterances that Austin describes as 'hollow and void'. Going further, he accuses non-serious speech of being 'parasitic'. This implies that not only does he consider non-serious utterances as *reliant* upon serious ones, but that he somehow *disapproves* of them. When he describes non-seriousness as a kind of 'ill that can *infect* all utterances' it appears that he can't help but denigrate it, as if it were a disease threatening the normal, healthy practices of speech. At worst, it appears that which Austin finds it necessary to exclude non-serious utterances in order to maintain the purity of his definition of the successful performative.

In Derrida's analysis, then, the terms 'serious' and 'non-serious' become attached to a very loaded set of values, which are revealed by the tropisms by which Austin models his concept. According to Derrida's reading, what Austin is excluding, when he rules out the 'non-serious', 'parasitism', 'etiolation', 'the non-ordinary', is 'the general theory' that would account for all of these supposed *abnormalities* – 'the possibility for every performative utterance (and a priori every other utterance) to be "quoted"'.⁵⁰ The general theory that would account for the possibility that every utterance can be quoted is, precisely, Derrida's theory of 'general citationality, – or rather a general iterability'. What Austin attempts to dismiss as a *parasite* is in fact the normal condition of language use – there is no 'vigorous host', no pure originary moment of utterance. In what may be the decisive move of his argument, Derrida asks:

Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a 'coded' or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or marriage were not identifiable in some way as a 'citation'?⁵¹

⁴⁸ *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 11th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁴⁹ Derrida, p. 15.

⁵⁰ Derrida, p. 16.

⁵¹ Derrida, p. 17.

Thus, what Austin seeks to exclude as an anomaly, as that which would render the performative 'void' – i.e. the possibility that it can be 'quoted' – is in fact 'the internal and positive condition of its possibility'. Derrida argues that these relatively specific or explicit performatives are 'determined modification[s]' of this general citationality or iterability 'without which there would not even be a "successful" performative'.⁵²

To give a sense of just how persuasive Derrida can be, here is a nice quote about a ditch:

Is this general possibility necessarily one of failure or trap into which language may *fall* or lose itself as in an abyss situated outside of or in front of itself? [...] In other words, does the quality of risk admitted by Austin surround language like a kind of *ditch* or external place of perdition which speech [...] could never hope to leave, but which it can escape by remaining 'at home,' by and in itself, in the shelter of its essence?⁵³

Citing 'the quality of risk admitted by Austin that he nevertheless seeks to exclude', Derrida vividly caricatures Austin's theory of language as remaining 'at home' in order to avoid falling into a ditch, an abyss of anomaly and abnormality, of accident and failure, that surrounds it. Derrida thus thinks that Austin situated the risk of failure, of that which is unintentional, as *external* to the performative ('an external place of perdition'). He emphasizes Austin's phrase 'hollow and void' – as if a performative lacking an authorizing intention is empty, and as if a failed performative is itself a kind of void, one that Austin equates with sheer negation, an 'abyss into which language can fall'. Derrida thus understands Austin to be excluding the non-serious in a single gesture, as if it were an overarching category, as if he harboured a moralizing distaste for all that could undermine the authority of speech. For Derrida, Austin's meticulousness in enumerating 'appropriate circumstances' was an attempt to demarcate an 'exhaustively definable context', to fix and label 'an entire field

⁵² Derrida, p. 15.

⁵³ Derrida, p. 17.

whose organizing center remains *intention*'.⁵⁴

The vivid persuasiveness of Derrida's deconstruction of Austin, represents just one juncture within a broader critique of the Western intellectual tradition's reliance upon a metaphysics of presence. Derrida identified a deep-rooted tendency to privilege the spoken over the written word, which he considered indicative of a metaphysical longing for 'a realm of pre-discursive being and immediate, unmediated encounter'.⁵⁵ Within this tradition, 'the spoken word is given a higher value because the speaker and listener are both *present* to the utterance simultaneously'. This co-presence is assumed to produce a more authentic encounter, and 'seems to guarantee the notion that in the spoken word we know what we mean'.⁵⁶ Throughout his work, Derrida aimed to demonstrate that writing is not a secondary derivation of speech; writing is denigrated because it reveals what, traditionally, philosophy has been at pains to ignore: the iterability of language – its ability to perform in excess of the intentions, and of the physical presence, of any given speaker.

In 'Signature Event Context' Derrida rounds on what he reads as Austin's dogmatic attempts to maintain the authority of speech. By ruling out threats to that authority as 'accidental, exterior', and naming them 'non-serious', Austin tries, 'in the name of ideal regulation',⁵⁷

to pass off as ordinary an ethical or teleological determination [...] that he acknowledges elsewhere [...] remains a philosophical 'ideal' – the presence to the self of a total context, the transparency of intentions, the presence of meaning [...] to the absolutely singular uniqueness of a speech act, etc.⁵⁸

Thus Derrida's Austin, for all the anti-essentialist promise of his central concept, must shore up his idealized notion of speech's irreducible authority by drawing

⁵⁴ Derrida, p. 15.

⁵⁵ Jackson, p. 117.

⁵⁶ Barbara Johnson, 'Translator's Introduction,' in Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. viii, emphasis added.

⁵⁷ Derrida, p. 15.

⁵⁸ Derrida, p. 17.

an ontological distinction between what he calls 'speaking seriously' and the various secondary, derivative, etiolated usages that fall into the 'non-serious'. And thus ends up repeating an error that is 'typical of that philosophical tradition with which he would like to have so few ties'.⁵⁹

Against the backdrop of Derrida's influential intellectual project, and on the basis of the passages from *How to Do Things With Words* that are reproduced in his essay, the distinction between serious and non-serious appears to be both the central organizing logic, and the gravely undermining flaw, of Austin's theory. As Felman notes, Derrida's reading is amongst those that has advanced the idea of Austin as a 'defender of the *values* of "seriousness"'.⁶⁰ However, it seems that, for all his close attention to *certain* elements of Austin's vocabulary, Derrida does not pause to consider the possible complicated and contradictory relationship Austin himself had with the word 'serious'.

What does Derrida assume Austin means by 'serious', and by 'non-serious'? In the most straightforward sense, Derrida understands Austin's non-serious as speech that lacks authorizing intention. In this sense, 'non-serious' connotes a lack of sincerity, which results (or, Austin appears to be arguing *should* result) in a lack of authority, and an utterance that is hollow, etiolated and void. There is an additional implication here, one that is not made explicit, but that is strongly implied when you read 'Signature Event Context' in light of Derrida's broader critique of the Western intellectual tradition: Austin is saying the non-serious is what need not be *taken* seriously, that is, by philosophers – by *serious people* (and Austin's branch of philosophy, Moral Philosophy, might well be thought of as an enterprise that takes itself especially seriously). However, what Derrida does not pause to ask is: does *Austin* go about his philosophizing, that is, his *speaking*, with 'seriousness'?

According to Felman, those who reproach Austin for his exclusion of the non-serious do so 'on the basis of the Austinian *statement*'. What they are failing to

⁵⁹ Derrida, p. 15.

⁶⁰ Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, p. 94, emphasis added.

take into account is 'the Austinian act'.⁶¹ The dominant readings of Austin pay attention 'only to what he *says*, not to what he *does*'.⁶² Once again, the question over what Austin was *doing* in what he was saying can be phrased in terms of philosophical ground. Derrida depicts Austin as attempting to protect language use from what he sees as a sort of unfortunate accident that can befall it: he models this as *falling* into an abyss, or (more comically) a ditch. For Felman, 'the very performance of the performative consists precisely in performing the loss of footing: it is the performance of the *loss of ground*'.⁶³

Crucially, although Derrida appears to acknowledge the way that Austin's theorizing tends to destabilize its own ground, he does not appreciate the full import, or potential, of Austin's *own* 'non-seriousness'. He does not pay attention to what, in light of Austin's own broader philosophical project, might be the import of what Austin himself *does with words*. To a certain extent, this is because Derrida reads Austin with a particular agenda. But I think it also has something to do with the *way* Derrida reads, by (famously) paying the kind of extremely close attention to particular paragraphs and sentences that *only* reading allows. Against this, I suggest we risk offending Derrida, and ask what happens if we attempt to get a sense of what Austin *does* with words by considering his lectures *as lectures*, that is, as embodied and situated acts of speech? In the following section, I will test out what happens when we attend to Austin's philosophical performance as it unfolds across just one of his lectures, and think of this lecture as it might have been encountered as a performance. For this experiment, I have selected Austin's second Harvard lecture, 'Conditions for Happy Performatives', the one containing the aforementioned 'offending paragraph', along with other key passages cited by Derrida. Instead of focusing in on those often-cited passages, attempting to refute Derrida's reading and replace it with my own, I suggest we pay attention to the lesser-known parts of the lecture. I also suggest we survey the movement of Austin's thoughts across the lecture as a whole. In so doing, I will weigh the risk of reinstating Austin's authorial intention, his presence, as the organizing centre of

⁶¹ Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, p. 95.

⁶² Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, p. 94.

⁶³ Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, p. 44.

the text, against the opportunity of hearing out Austin's philosophical *voice* in its texture, its quirkiness and its difficulty.

6. Austin's philosophical performance

Austin begins his second lecture by reviewing the gains of his previous outing:

We were to consider, if you remember, some cases and senses (only some, Heaven help us!) in which to *say* something is to *do* something; or in which *by* saying something or *in* saying something we are doing something (13).

We can already hear something of Austin's voice in that aside, encased in brackets '(only some, Heaven help us!)', which are both an admission of limitation and an exclamation. He then reminds his audience of the 'preliminary isolation of the performative' that the previous lecture attempted, before offering the following assessment of how things stand:

So far then we have merely felt the firm ground of prejudice slide away beneath our feet. But now how, *as philosophers*, are we to proceed? One thing we might go on to do, of course, is to take it all back: another is to bog, by logical states, down (13).

It is unclear at this point whether he means this as a glance at what he perceives as philosophy's tendency to dig its heels in, or else retreat from awkward propositions, or whether he is merely lampooning his own capabilities 'as' a philosopher. In any case, if these are the options available to philosophers (or we, his audience, if we approach the problem 'as philosophers'), then neither sounds very promising.

In the text of the lectures, something of the manner of Austin's speech comes through in the vocabulary he uses, his little colloquialisms and sayings, way he structures sentences, what Sedgwick calls his 'dandified fastidious syntax'.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Sedgwick, p.17.

Responses to Austin tend to keep this element of his work, as they do his wry asides, 'in parenthesis'. It is indeed customary, in much academic work, to bracket off such quirks as inessential to the theory being expounded. However, I have come to the apprehension that Austin's 'asides' are worth thinking about, in that they tend to be the moments when he slyly weighs up the merits of one philosophical approach against another: he talks about what he is doing, the way he is doing it, and the limitations he considers a necessary part of his project. What frequently emerges from these asides is that Austin's humour has a self-subversive edge. But, I contend, in asides like this Austin is not just being amenably self-deprecating, or bracketably wry. Rather, it is by such means that he questions repeatedly and insistently his entitlement and authority to 'say something'. And, as we will see, as the lecture goes on, this self-subversive tendency gradually overreaches its status as a mere aside.

Before I continue with Austin's lecture, I will first offer an aside of my own, concerning Austin's antagonistic relationship with the philosophical movement known as logical positivism. In the broad terms offered by Geoffrey Warnock in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the dominant Anglophone philosophical movement of Austin's day is described as 'fundamentally a theory of meaning, which was indeed supposed capable of settling rigorously, and in fairly short order, almost everything'.⁶⁵ Expounding the 'lofty, loose rhetoric of old-fashioned idealism',⁶⁶ logical positivism dismissed ordinary language (that is, language in its situated, daily usage) as an obstacle to philosophical truth, and considered that it was the task of the philosopher to 'seek to find, beneath or behind mere surface vagueness and superfluities, the essential structure that – according to the theory – must be there'.⁶⁷ In a reaction against this, Austin and those associated with so-called 'ordinary language philosophy', cultivated an approach characterized by 'a deliberate abstention from the pursuit of generality, of wide-ranging explanations or justifications, of purportedly systematic examination of whole families of concepts'. For Austin in particular, this did not amount to a wholesale rejection of theory or theorizing – it was more

⁶⁵ Warnock, p. 149.

⁶⁶ Warnock, p. 147.

⁶⁷ Warnock, p. 150.

a matter of ‘prudently limited ambition, of not biting off more than one could analytically chew’.⁶⁸

I could go further with my effort to situate Austin in his context. I could, for example, cite some of the several accounts of his work that recount biographical details, that discuss Austin’s habits, his relationships, his style of speaking. Why am I, for now, resisting this? Perhaps because I want to continue my reading of – my encounter with – the Austin of this particular lecture without mooring my perception of him, his voice, his presence, to a biographical figuring of the man. As part of this I have surveyed, in fairly short order, only the most often repeated, easily digested elements of the ‘Austin myth’. That and a passing comment, by Cavell, as to ‘Austin’s hobby of raising pigs’.⁶⁹ I will let the pigs prompt the question: to what extent does Austin’s *quirkiness* figure in ‘readings’ of his work? There is something a little bit quirky about the way Austin-the-philosopher is depicted by Warnock in the philosophy encyclopaedia. It seems that Warnock cannot resist characterizing Austin’s philosophical method using metaphors that evoke lowly, everyday activities: Austin is said to advocate: ‘patient spadework – walking, even plodding ...before trying to run’.⁷⁰ In contrast to luminaries of other more ambitious philosophical schools, Austin emerges as a solid pragmatist, one who produced work that was thorough, if less than thrilling. What a reader might infer from this is that the best thing to do is skip Austin’s ‘plodding’ exposition and cut right to his findings, his handy take-home concepts (and indeed, as I have argued, many do just that).

Does the Austin of this lecture correspond with the plodding figure we find in the philosophy encyclopedia? Sedgwick, a committed reader of Austin, does not think so, and I find her characterization of Austin’s style alluring, even irresistible. In *Touching Feeling*, she attributes a certain relish, and even a degree of filthiness, in Austin’s philosophical voice. *How to Do Things With*

⁶⁸ Warnock, p. 149.

⁶⁹ In Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, p. xii.

⁷⁰ Warnock, p. 149.

Words, she writes, 'is inflected by the language of texture'.⁷¹ The 'dryness' of Austin's style is beset by 'wet' tropisms: he might describe philosophy as having to 'bog, by logical stages, down' (13), or 'flounder around' (151). At the start of the third lecture, he comments that 'we may seem to have two new keys in our hands, *and*, of course, simultaneously two new skids under our feet' (25). In Sedgwick's evocative terms, it is as though, for Austin, 'the dimensions of true/false (for the constative) and happy/unhappy (for the performative) are always in danger of wiping out along the confounding axis of wet/dry'.⁷²

It is notable that Austin tends to deploy these moist tropisms at the moments when he is reflecting on way his philosophy is going, reflecting on the customary strategies *of* philosophy. What emerges here is a sense of both muckiness and loss of ground. Or perhaps, instead of and out-and-out absence of ground, Austin is thinking of a loosening up of its firmness, a kind of mud in which one might get 'bogged down', or slip and lose one's footing. At this point, we may recall Derrida's evocative ditch-falling metaphor, which signals his conviction that Austin *excludes* failure as an accident that befalls language. In this lecture, however, we are beginning to see that the 'exclusion' is not quite as clear-cut as Derrida would have it. It seems that Austin is not only interested in failure, that he thematised it in his language, but also that he is *staging* a certain theoretical failure on his own part. And when I write 'staging' I am deliberately invoking that word, that place, that position of being on stage – on the philosophical stage, on the literal stage, the podium of the lecture hall. Sedgwick attributes a 'mucky consistency' to Austin's taxonomic work in particular.⁷³ As we have seen, the perceived flaws or failures of Austin's taxonomy have been a source of contention and concern for his supposed 'inheritors'. So, with the surprise, the feel of this mud still fresh, I will now ask: how does Austin go about his taxonomic work in this particular lecture, and what can it tell us about his philosophical practice?

After reviewing the gains of his previous lecture, Austin introduces the object of

⁷¹ Sedgwick, p. 16.

⁷² Sedgwick, p. 17.

⁷³ Sedgwick, p.17.

his enquiry: 'Let us first at least concentrate attention on the little matter already mentioned in passing – this matter of the “appropriate circumstances”' (13). As he explains, 'a great many other things have to be right and go right if we are said to have happily brought off our action. What these are we may hope to discover by looking at and classifying types of case in which something *goes wrong* and the act – marrying, betting, bequeathing, christening, or what not – is therefore at least to some extent a failure' (14). He thereby proposes to elaborate what he calls 'the doctrine of *the things that can be and go wrong*', or 'the doctrine of the *Infelicities*' (14). Next, he proposes a framework for the success of the performative (which, you will recall, consists of six points divided into two major classes – (A1) to (B2), and (Γ1-2) – relating to persons and circumstances, correctly executed procedures, and the presence of certain thoughts and feelings). Having established these *positive* criteria, he then proceeds to pay more attention to the *negative* possibilities: to what happens when various elements of these criteria are *not* met. As he observes, there are 'considerable differences between [the various] “ways” of being unhappy' (15). Here it appears to get complicated; it gets technical. Austin identifies a class of contraventions he calls 'misexecutions' – misexecutions arise when the conditions he has labeled under (B.1) and (B.2) ('(B.1) the procedure must be executed... both correctly and (B.2) completely') are not met. He then *further* subdivides this class: 'The Class B.1 is that of Flaws, the Class B.2 that of Hitches' (17).

So, we now see that flaws are quite different to hitches, and then again muffed executions (17) are to be distinguished from botched procedures (16). As you might have noticed, this is not exactly the lofty language of abstraction; and yet Austin treats this lowly vocabulary with a level of attention that suggests he takes it very seriously (I will reflect on the significance such daily inflections held for Austin in due course). The Austin that emerges from Derrida's reading is one who sought to exclude as marginal or accidental that which he found threatening or inconvenient – as a kind of illness, a parasite, an anomaly. How then to account for the linguistic and figural relish with which Austin accounts for these aberrations? The second half of this lecture is full of examples of things going wrong. For instance, Austin imagines what might render his favourite

example, the marriage ceremony, unsuccessful thus: 'if we, say, utter the formula incorrectly, or if, say, we are not in a position to do the act because we are, say, married already or it is the purser and not the captain who is conducting the ceremony, then the act in question, e.g. marrying, is not successfully performed at all, does not come off, is not achieved.' He concludes, or appears to conclude, that in such cases 'out act (marrying, &c.) is void or without effect'. But then, characteristically, he qualifies: 'This does not mean, of course, to say that *we won't have done anything*: lots of things will be done – we shall *most interestingly* have committed the act of bigamy' (17).

The cumulative effect of Austin's tendency to amass examples, and in so doing to imaginatively embellish them, is that the statement he is setting out to prove can be all but eclipsed by them. Thinking up the various 'ways' that a performative act *might* go wrong requires an imaginative effort that *necessarily* tends toward the aberrant, the perverse. The things that he is, ostensibly, telling his audience they need to exclude, ignore, rationalize – emerge as vivid, funny, and pleasurable. In other words, Austin's 'negative' examples are full of 'positive' qualities. They are diverting in the sense of being both entertaining and distracting.

This effect is compounded as Austin nears the end of his lecture. Having established his scheme, he then sets about demonstrating its limitations. He does so using a series of quite odd, jarring examples. Having asked 'Are these cases of infelicity mutually exclusive?', he notes 'the answer to this is obvious', adding:

No, in the sense that we can go wrong in two ways at once (we can insincerely promise a donkey to give it a carrot)' (23).

Austin's wry little word-picture is encased in parentheses, as if to signal to his (future?) readers, 'this is a little supplement', a joking way of demonstrating that, in practice, things are more complicated than the neat scheme implies.⁷⁴ And

⁷⁴ Although parentheses and other such textual markers are not, strictly speaking, audible in speech, it is possible to signal, by various means, when one is making a parenthesized remark.

the donkey is only the start of it. Austin devotes the remainder of the lecture to demonstrating how 'the ways of going wrong' can 'shade into one another' and 'overlap' and the decision between them is 'arbitrary' in various ways' (23). He demonstrates the indeterminacy of his categories with a series of illustrations that begin faux-seriously, but tend increasingly toward the downright silly. First, there is:

'Suppose, for example, I see a vessel on the stocks, walk up and smash the bottle hung at the stem, proclaim "I name this ship the *Mr. Stalin*" and for good measure kick away the chocks: but the trouble is, I was not the person chosen to name it (whether or not – an additional complication – *Mr. Stalin* was the destined name; perhaps in a way it is even more of a shame if it was). We can all agree:

- (1) that the ship was not thereby named;
- (2) that it is an infernal shame' (23).

By using numbered points in this way, Austin borrows a mechanism of taxonomy in order to stage what is, effectively, a punchline. We might observe that what seems to have broken forth in this example is Austin's voice. Austin's wry, self-deprecating voice seems to have escaped its parentheses and begun to infect the formal conventions of philosophical method. In what follows, the animals too have seem been let loose. Austin brings his lecture to a close by arguing that, whereas in the *Mr. Stalin* example, the act goes wrong because 'I was not the proper person, had not the "capacity" to perform it', in instances, 'where there is not even a pretense of capacity or a colourable claim to it, then there is no accepted conventional procedure; it is a mockery'. And Austin characterizes 'mockery' by comparing it to 'marriage with a monkey' (24). Although, he adds:

one could say that *part of the procedure* is getting oneself appointed. When the saint baptized the penguins, was this void because the procedure of baptizing is inappropriate to be applied to penguins, or because there is no accepted procedure of baptizing anything except humans? (24)

A qualification, an aside, a little joke can be signaled by a change in the tone or pitch of the voice, an incline of the head, a sly sideways glance.

Having reflected so vividly on these matters, Austin ends by saying:

I do not think that these uncertainties matter in theory, though it is pleasant to investigate them and in practice convenient to be ready, as jurists are, with the terminology to cope with them (24).

Surveying this lecture as a whole, what is it that Austin is *doing*? On a theoretical level, his argumentative moves could be précised as: a) establishing a taxonomy he declares to be both ‘obvious’ and ‘not hard and fast’, b) complicating it with sub-clauses, c) elaborating a succession of qualifications and exceptions before d) declaring that the classificatory act is itself arbitrary, and e) compounding this sense of arbitrariness with bizarre and silly imagery before, finally, f) saying none of this matters ‘in theory’, although the investigation is ‘pleasant’ and the results may prove ‘convenient’ in practice, by providing us with ‘appropriate terminology’ to cope with ‘uncertainties’. His reference to ‘jurists’ here is interesting, suggesting that, ‘in practice,’ we are, in effect, called upon to make judgments relating to the various uncertainties that might surround any given speech act.

On this evidence, it would be possible to read Austin as, effectively, arguing against himself, dismantling his own theoretical statement, excepting himself from the tradition or history of philosophy. Reading this lecture, I find Austin’s taxonomic work becomes so overcomplicated that it is near impossible to follow without repeat readings. Still, there is something that impresses me about the taxonomic work; it seems to *promise* some level of demystification (as Austin might say, a set of ‘*shining new tools* to crack the crib of reality’⁷⁵). Thus, Austin’s taxonomic work both attracts and resists the will to knowledge, to sureness (for Austin, the shining new tools bring with them ‘*shining new skids* under our metaphysical feet’.⁷⁶

How might I characterize the Austin I have encountered through this reading?

⁷⁵ J.L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 241, emphasis added.

⁷⁶ Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 241, emphasis added.

Inasmuch as his scheme undoes itself precisely *through* its meticulous attention to its possible exceptions, Austin's performance here is (to amplify Sedgwick's characterization) comic dandified fastidiousness.⁷⁷ When, at the outset, he asks, 'how are we, *as philosophers*, to proceed?', he might just be referring casually to his self-evident status as a philosopher. Or he might be opening up the question of what it would mean to proceed 'as' a 'Philosopher' (posing as one, pretending to be one, acting as one). What kind of philosopher-figure is it that responds so curiously to the 'most interesting' occurrence of the *something e/se* that is done when the performative fails, or misfires, who cannot help but figuratively put himself right there, at the scene of transgression: 'we shall most interestingly have committed the act of bigamy'; 'suppose, for example *I* see a vessel in the stocks'. It is my sense that in this lecture, Austin dramatizes the predicament of the philosopher who is unable *not* to attend to the variability, the unpredictability of circumstances. What this performance might be 'saying' is that that the contingencies of reality, of practice, tend to exceed categorization, and so disrupt the philosopher's attempts at taxonomy. Thus, we might propose that what Austin is *doing* through his self-subverting performance is lampooning the philosopher who would attempt to impose his overarching, abstract scheme upon reality.

In this lecture, Austin both emphasizes and demonstrates the extent to which the categories he proposes overlap, shade into one another, leak. That which cannot be taxonomized with any degree of finality is the situated practice of speech, the contingencies and complexities of everyday speech situations (what Austin might call 'normal circumstances', what the philosophical encyclopedia would refer to as 'ordinary language', what others might say is 'real life'). But, at the lecture's end, Austin's examples become somewhat uncoupled from the normal, the ordinary, and the real – overtaken by donkeys,

⁷⁷ I have in mind here Brian Dillon's characterization of Laurel and Hardy as 'comic dandies' marked by their 'total concentration on the phenomenal realm'. The pair 'take their pratfalls not because they are stupid, or careless, or distracted, but because they are too attentive to the task at hand. It's Ollie's fastidiousness that leads to the loss of his trousers, Stan's extreme care that means he will inevitably hammer that nail into a water pipe.' Brian Dillon, 'Another Fine Mess: Theses on Slapstick', in *Objects in This Mirror: Essays* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), pp. 260-271 (p. 264).

monkeys and penguins, animal-figures that, incongruously, trespass into the human world of ceremonial utterances.

Long after the lecture is over, the donkeys, monkeys and penguins remain. How am I to respond to my own pleasure in these examples, my own inability to ignore or forget them? The animals in Austin's examples stand out because they are in the *wrong* place. Felman apprehends a quality of *philosophical scandal* in such incursions, in Austin's insistence on 'the triviality of the witty example', which it itself incongruous, marking as it does the intervention of the comic onto the otherwise 'homogenous plane of the theoretical stage'.⁷⁸

Austin's incongruous animal figures do, ostensibly, have a *theoretical* function: that is, to demonstrate what is and isn't appropriate, proper, effective. Arguably, they overreach this function. How then to account for the *enjoyment* that Austin seems to take in these aberrations? The way his examples of things going wrong – and the things that he is, ostensibly, telling his audience they need to exclude, ignore, rationalize are, in being so funny, so vivid, all but *impossible to* exclude, to ignore?

7. The 'opposite' of serious

How might this apprehension of Austin's playfulness, his faux-seriousness, his trivializing methodology help us to overcome – or at least, sidestep – Derrida's pervasively influential critique of Austin? And how might we begin to turn this toward the problem of the theatre/performativity conundrum, and so help Jackson out at her dinner table, in her attempt to open up Austin's work for an intrigued yet mildly suspicious pair of performance practitioners?

The problem for Jackson and for performance studies is Austin's apparent dismissal of the theatrical utterance as 'non-serious', as part of a broader 'exclusion' of *all* that would threaten the authority of speech. Therefore, in order to get beyond Derrida's reading it is necessary to prise open the serious/non-

⁷⁸ Felman, p. 84.

serious binary and ask if, for Austin, they can possibly be the totalizing, metaphysically opposed categories that Derrida had assumed them to be (indeed, that Derrida's argument *required* them to be). In order to do this, it is necessary to put some pressure on Derrida's assumptions about Austin's own seriousness. If Derrida's reading of Austin depends on shoring up the idea that Austin established the 'non-serious' as a category, what he is missing here is the possibility that Austin's understanding of, and commitment to, *that which is not serious* (that which is trivial, entertaining, funny as well as that which is unintentional) is heterogeneous, complex and philosophically motivated.

In 'What Did Derrida Want of Austin' (itself originally a lecture, reprinted alongside the transcript of an accompanying seminar in *Philosophical Passages*, 1995), Stanley Cavell suggests that Austin's work can be read as a sustained attack on one kind of philosophical seriousness: the lofty idealism of logical positivism. Cavell points out that, in the context in which Austin was working, this style, or school, of philosophy was 'a hegemonic presence more complete [...] than that of any one of today's politically or intellectually advanced positions'; and it was 'pervasive and dominant in the Anglo-American world from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s and beyond, almost throughout the humanities and social sciences' and was 'virtually unopposed on any intellectually organized scale'.⁷⁹ Cavell recounts how Austin went after certain key figures and texts of this movement so relentlessly that 'certain philosophers have never forgiven him for it'.⁸⁰ Austin's trivializing, mocking philosophical performance was met with outright hostility by some. Therefore, in order to catch a sense of what the word 'serious' might have carried for Austin, it is necessary to understand why this kind of 'seriousness' was a problem for him and what was at stake in going against it.

Austin's antagonism towards this philosophical seriousness is something Derrida does not acknowledge, or credit – for him Austin ended up repeating moves typical of this 'philosophical tradition with which he would like to have so

⁷⁹ Cavell, *Philosophical Passages*, p. 51.

⁸⁰ Cavell, pp. 71-2. Cavell refers in particular to A.J. Ayer.

few ties'.⁸¹ But, as Cavell argues: 'Derrida hasn't an ear for, or patience for, certain dimensions of Austin, for example, for his allusiveness, his seriousness, his *mockery of false seriousness*.'⁸² Neither does he consider what might have been at stake for Austin in this problematization of philosophical seriousness. More straightforwardly, Cavell suspects that Derrida 'simply hadn't read certain texts presupposed by *How to Do Things With Words*'.⁸³ How does this charge, of scant or partial reading, relate to Cavell's other charge against Derrida, namely, that he didn't get Austin's jokes? Against this, how might my own enjoyment of Austin's unseriousness be put to work?

As we have seen, Derrida takes Austin to be excluding the 'non-serious', along with 'parasitism', 'etiolation', 'the non-ordinary' in a single gesture (albeit of two parts). However, as Cavell notes, in the passages from Austin's text that Derrida cites, there is in fact 'the exclusion (if that is the word) of *two different theories*', each of which Austin developed elsewhere. Therefore, when Austin says he is "'excluding" the theories from his discussion, the obvious sense is that they are simply not being rehearsed in this place'.⁸⁴ The first of these theories considers performatives as actions; the second considers them as utterances. Austin acknowledges that *as utterances*, what performatives share with *all utterances* is indeed the possibility for non-serious uses, including those 'parasitic' quotations and recitations, on stages and in poems. In his second lecture, Austin acknowledges that although this 'might be brought into a more general account', it is a possibility 'we are deliberately at present excluding' (22). This is a theory Austin does indeed develop in a text named 'Pretending'. By its title alone, this text would appear to be a promising line of enquiry for a performance scholar; it is, however, by Austin's own admission, one of his least significant contributions to philosophy, and one I am for the moment leaving aside. A more productive line of enquiry, although one that requires a little more work to glean its relevance for performance studies, is that concerning the *first* of Austin's theories – the one that deals with what Austin calls the 'extenuating

⁸¹ Derrida, p. 15.

⁸² Cavell, p. 70, emphasis added.

⁸³ Cavell, p. 71.

⁸⁴ Cavell, p. 52.

circumstances' that performatives, as *actions*, share with *all actions*. That is, Austin's theory of excuses. Austin alludes to this theory in *How to Do Things With Words* thus:

I mean that actions in general (not all) are liable, for example, to be done under duress, or by accident, or owing to this or that variety of mistake, say, or otherwise unintentionally (21).

Derrida reads this as the first (and lesser) instance of a single, overarching gesture of exclusion. However, as Cavell observes, again, this is actually a *different theory*, one that Austin here refers to as the 'doctrine of extenuation', elsewhere the study of 'excuses'. He comments: 'I am not going into the general doctrine here... we must just remember, though, that features of this sort can and do constantly obtrude into any particular case we are discussing' (21).

As I have already intimated, this juncture of Austin's reflections highlights an important tension within his work, one that Derrida does not recognize, or does not find relevant to his own project: that is, the tension between speech and body. Cavell is alert to this, and argues that the 'speech acts' that Austin considers in *How to Do Things With Words* as human *acts*, share qualities (or liabilities) with both *utterances in general* and *actions in general*. Since human actions in general, as actions of bodies, are liable to be performed involuntarily, by accident, automatically, or unintentionally, so too are speech acts. This emphasis upon uncertain intention is important, because the question of intentionality can in many ways be considered the pivotal point of Derrida's deconstruction of Austin. In Derrida's understanding Austin is proposing a theory of speech with *intention* as its 'organizing centre'.⁸⁵ In Derrida's reading, Austin dismisses utterances that lack this authorizing intention, that are merely 'quoted', as hollow, void, empty of vigour. Thus, as a result of Derrida's reading, it becomes possible to equate Austin's all-important concept of the 'force' of a performative utterance with the *thrust* of deliberate, directed intention.

⁸⁵ Derrida, p. 15. The word 'intention' is italicized within Derrida's own text, signaling its importance.

However, in 'A Plea for Excuses',⁸⁶ another lecture which, according to Cavell, forms one of Austin's 'most notable contributions to philosophy',⁸⁷ Austin not only problematizes Derrida's supposition as to the centrality of intention; he entirely displaces it. In this lecture, Austin thoroughly problematizes intention via his consideration of the various excuses that might be offered 'when someone is accused of having done something, or... when someone is *said* to have done something which is bad, wrong, inept, unwelcome, or in some of the other numerous possible ways untoward'.⁸⁸ Working meticulously, through concrete examples, Austin considers the precise circumstances in which one might claim to have acted unintentionally, involuntarily, inadvertently, unwittingly, spontaneously, impulsively, absent-mindedly, carelessly, inattentively, tactlessly, thoughtlessly, clumsily, by accident, by mistake, etc. etc. Against the observation that 'the tenor of many excuses is that I did it but only *in a way*, not just flatly like that', Austin pays particular attention to how, in practice, our use of adverbs reveals unexpected complications and dissociations in the way we account for our movements and actions:

I sit in my chair in the usual way - I am not in a daze or influenced by threats or the like; it will here not do to say either that I sat in it intentionally, nor yet at the same time that I sat in it automatically or from habit... It is bedtime, I am alone, I yawn: but I do not yawn involuntarily (or voluntarily!), nor yet deliberately.⁸⁹

Thus, Austin demonstrates, and emphasizes, that the commonest adverbs relating to intention are by no means used 'dichotomistically'. There is no simple equivalence or inversion of the kinds of actions you would describe as being done 'voluntarily' as those you would say you did 'involuntarily'. When we refer to actions, the opposite of 'voluntary' is not, in fact, 'involuntary but rather 'under constraint... duress or obligation or influence'. Equally, if we wish to describe an action as the inverse of 'involuntary' we would not say 'voluntary' but, actually, 'I

⁸⁶ Delivered as Austin's presidential address to the Aristotelian Society in London in 1956.

⁸⁷ Cavell, p.53.

⁸⁸ Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 176.

⁸⁹ Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 190.

did it deliberately' or 'on purpose'.⁹⁰ What Austin is doing here is demonstrating the insufficiency of structures based on grammatical logic as a means of categorizing human behavior. More specifically, he is showing that in spite of their apparent straightforwardness, there is nothing obvious about 'negations and opposites':

It does not pay to assume that a word must have an opposite, or one opposite, whether it is a 'positive' word like 'willfully' or a 'negative' word like 'inadvertently'. Rather, we should be asking ourselves why there is no use for the verb 'advertently'. For above all, it will not do to assume that the 'positive' word must be around to wear the trousers; commonly enough the 'negative' (looking) word marks the (positive) abnormality.⁹¹

One would have thought Derrida would be amenable to the ways in which Austin debunks (or even, it might be ventured, *deconstructs*) binary logic, and the corresponding presumptions as to positive and negative values. The reference to '(positive) abnormality' specifically in relation to the word 'inadvertent' is particularly significant in relation to Derrida's comments as to the (positive) presence of conscious intention as the 'organizing centre' of Austin's theory.⁹² However, it is at this point that I feel it necessary to take a step to the side of Derrida's reading by drawing attention to Austin's curiously, perhaps offhandedly anthropomorphic turn of phrase when he asserts that the positive word does not necessarily 'wear the trousers' (this term is also, of course, gendered – something to which I will return in the final section of this chapter). This seemingly offhanded, slightly eccentric tropism does not seem out of place in Austin's lecture, which is full of exemplary bodies whose agency, or authority (the extent to which they 'wear the trousers' in any given situation) is doubtful.

Reflecting on 'A Plea for Excuses', Felman comments that the 'incongruity of Austin's examples seems to institute triviality itself as a philosophy – as a method'.⁹³ As Austin says of his approach to exemplification: 'it is worth employing *the most idiosyncratic* or, sometimes, boring means to stimulate and

⁹⁰ Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 191.

⁹¹ Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 192.

⁹² Derrida, p. 15.

⁹³ Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, p. 83.

to discipline our wretched imaginations'.⁹⁴ He adds:

By imagining cases with vividness and fullness we should be able to decide in which precise terms to describe, say, Miss Plimsoll's⁹⁵ action in writing, so carefully DAIRY on her fine new book: we should be able to distinguish between sheer, mere, pure, and simple mistake and inadvertence.⁹⁶

It is on the basis of this lecture that Felman develops what I consider to be her most compelling insights, which concern the centrality of the body to Austin's understanding of human action. Felman comments that, when Austin points out that there is no such word as 'advertently', he makes 'a linguistic observation that seems to proceed from a psychoanalytic intuition'. As she notes, for Austin, 'intentionality itself [...] is often studied as stemming rather from a discontinuity or from a break in intention. Intention, for Austin, is scarcely present to itself, scarcely *conscious*'.⁹⁷ Cavell agrees, inasmuch as 'excuses are as essentially implicated in Austin's view of human action as slips and over-determination are in Freud's'.⁹⁸ Although they disagree on the extent of the relationship between psychoanalysis and performative theory, Cavell and Felman agree that the two intellectual projects have a common goal, that is, 'the *rethinking* of the human act'.⁹⁹

For Austin, this begins with a meticulous journey through concrete examples that reveal the nuances of usage. For example, the way certain adverbs of justification are wholly unacceptable in certain circumstances, as in 'Something in the lad's upturned face appealed to him, he threw a brick at it – "spontaneously"?'.¹⁰⁰ I cannot ignore the extent to which I find such examples funny. I detect in them a slapstick tendency, not only in the way bodies are

⁹⁴ Austin, p. 184.

⁹⁵ Is it a coincidence that a character by that name of Miss Plimsoll featured in *Witness for the Prosecution*, a play by Agatha Christie premiered in London's West End in 1953, three years before Austin gave this lecture at the Aristotelian Society? Might we read in this allusion another clue that Austin was not so averse to the theatre after all?

⁹⁶ Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 198.

⁹⁷ Felman, p. 70.

⁹⁸ Cavell, p. 53.

⁹⁹ Felman, p. 64, emphasis original.

¹⁰⁰ Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 190.

depicted, but in the movements of the language itself toward sudden, unexpected moments of impact. Whack! The seemingly harmless, mundane or boring example is suddenly beset with incongruous, pointless brutality. Near the beginning of the lecture, Austin proposes the study of excuses 'provides us with one means of introducing some classification into the vast miscellany of "actions"'.¹⁰¹ But his examples – unexpected bricks in the face – exceed this classificatory aim. What is at stake here, philosophically? What does he *do* with this slapstick violence? Cavell recounts the 'revelatory effect' Austin's 1955 Harvard lectures had on him, cementing his decision to pursue a career in philosophy. He reflects that 'like any conversion experience... the effect is apt to seem out of proportion to anything you might think to call its cause'. There is evidently much at stake for Cavell in Austin's silly examples. He asks: 'Could it really be that so decisive a change in the course of my life ...could have been brought about by Austin's trivial, if amusing examples?'.¹⁰²

Cavell does not go as far as Felman in his acknowledgement of the relationship between Austin's performative theory and psychoanalysis. In his view, 'in contrast to Freud's vision of the human being as a field of significance whose actions express a wider meaning than we might care to be questioned about, Austin's vision is of the human being as a field of vulnerability whose actions imply wider consequences and effects and results – if narrower meaning – than we should have to be answerable for'.¹⁰³ Cavell describes their disagreement in terms of the 'interpretive morals' each draws from Austin's humour. For him, this idea of the human being as a 'field of vulnerability' is key; the philosophical stakes of Austin's work on excuses has to do with the possibility of forgiveness:

What marks the limit of the excusable, justifiable, the explainable? And what lies beyond it? And who has the authority to draw that boundary? The contemplation of excuses might well lead one to surmise that the consequences, concomitants, up-shots, effects, results, etc. of the human necessity for action [...] is apt to become unbearable.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 180.

¹⁰² Cavell, *Philosophical Passages*, p. 43.

¹⁰³ Cavell in Felman, p. xvi.

¹⁰⁴ Cavell, *Philosophical Passages*, p. 54.

In 'A Plea for Excuses', Austin dramatizes this moral jeopardy through disparities of scale. His examples range, almost imperceptibly, occasionally uncomfortably, from the silly to the disturbing: dropping a tea tray, breaking a cup, knocking over the milk jug, stepping on a snail, shooting a donkey (again, the donkey), smashing a boy's face in, pushing someone over a cliff. Then there is the altogether more upsetting real-life example of Regina vs. Finney case heard at Shrewsbury Assizes in 1874 concerning the fatal scalding of an asylum inmate in his bath, when a distracted attendant turned on the hot tap instead of the cold. Frequently, what the examples make manifest is the indeterminacy of the border between (mere, inadvertent) physical movement and (serious, consequence-bearing) act:

I do an act A1 (say, crush a snail) *inadvertently* if, in the course of executing by means of movements of my body parts some other act A2 (say, in walking down the public path) I fail to exercise such meticulous supervision over the courses of those movements as would have been needed to ensure that they did not bring about the untoward event (here, the impact on the snail).¹⁰⁵

Austin's examples dramatize the moral indeterminacies of physical action, and do so repeatedly through funny disparities of scale: 'We may plead that we trod on the snail inadvertently: but not on a baby – you ought to look where you are putting your great feet'.¹⁰⁶ Austin's examples in this lecture depict the body as a doubtful, clumsy, mysterious thing. For Cavell this is key:

Excuses betoken, we might say, the incessant, unending vulnerability of human action, its exposure to the independence of the world and the preoccupation of the mind. I would like to say that it turns philosophy's attention patiently and thoroughly to something philosophy would love to ignore – to the fact that human life is constrained to the life of the human body, to what Emerson calls the giant I always take with me.¹⁰⁷

It becomes apparent, then, that Austin is doing something philosophically

¹⁰⁵ Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 192.

¹⁰⁶ Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 194.

¹⁰⁷ Cavell, *Philosophical Passages*, p. 53.

important through his examples, not in spite of but through his inclusion of incongruous, jarring, funny details. Indeed, Austin makes his aim in this lecture very explicit. He is out to unsettle 'a vague and comforting idea in the background that, after all, in the last analysis, doing an action must come down to the making of physical movements with parts of the body'.¹⁰⁸ He is thus engaged in an effort to *discomfort* his audience in order to stage the rethinking of the human act. He does this through his jarring examples – through comic disparity that can often be puzzling, and by highlighting how difficult it is to draw the line between intention and unintentional, between social and physical, between the material body and subjective agency: 'If I have broken your dish or your romance, perhaps the best excuse I can find will be clumsiness.'¹⁰⁹

In 'A Plea for Excuses', Austin depicts numerous bodies whose intentions are not clear and singular but are multiple and conflicting. Intentions that, to borrow Austin's words, 'overlap' and 'shade into one another'. He enumerates the minor variations in the excuses we proffer when 'flurried', the terms by which we account for our action, the way we refer to things our bodies have done. In what I consider the most compelling insight of her response to Austin, Felman draws a link between his work on excuses, and his work in *How to Do Things With Words*, to reflect on how the *speaking body* is figured, and theorized in the latter. She reads Austin's remark on breaking dishes and romances, in particular, as reflecting a 'lucid view' of what she calls 'the inherent *incongruity* of the speaking body'.¹¹⁰ For Felman, 'the problem of the human act ... consists in *the relation between language and body*'. It is 'that which problematizes at one and the same time the separation and the opposition between the two'.¹¹¹

In the ninth lecture, considering how to draw the line between the act and the consequences, Austin comes up repeatedly against the acknowledgement that 'the uttering of noises' is a 'physical movement':

¹⁰⁸ Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 178.

¹⁰⁹ Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 177.

¹¹⁰ Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, p.82, emphasis added.

¹¹¹ Felman, p. 65.

to say certain words is necessarily, in part, to make more or less indescribable movements with the vocal organs. So that the divorce between the 'physical' actions and acts of saying something is not in all ways complete – there is some connexion.¹¹²

This echoes Austin's comment, in 'A Plea for Excuses' that:

There is indeed a vague and comforting idea in the background that, after all, in the last analysis, doing an action must come down to the making of physical movements with parts of the body; this this is about as true as that saying something must, in the last analysis, come down to the making of movements with the tongue.¹¹³

Felman reads in Austin's work a set of reflections, and demonstrations, of the indissoluble yet problematic relation between an *act* of speech and the *body* that both produces that speech and, in many cases, is the referent of that speech. The speaking body refers to, attempts to give an account of, its *own* movements, its own 'complex internal machinery'. Crucially, Felman argues that:

The act, an enigmatic and problematic production of the *speaking body*, destroys from its inception the metaphysical dichotomy between the domain of the 'mental' and the domain of the 'physical', breaks down the opposition between body and spirit, between matter and language.¹¹⁴

8. The scene of the promise

To breed an animal with the right to make promises – is not this the paradoxical problem nature has set itself with regard to man? And is it not man's true problem?¹¹⁵

It is with this citation, from Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*, that Felman begins her book-length discussion of Austin's work. For Felman, this

¹¹² Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, p. 114.

¹¹³ Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 178.

¹¹⁴ Felman, p. 65.

¹¹⁵ From *The Genealogy of Morals*, cited in Felman, p. 3.

prompts the question: 'In what way is the very logic of promising a sign of a fundamental contradiction which is precisely the contradiction of the human?'

In light of this, we can identify something *pertinently* silly about Austin's recourse to the non-human figure in *How to Do Things With Words*. There is persistence in his recourse to animals that, continuing throughout the lectures, can even come across as mildly belligerent: we have already encountered his reference to marriage with a monkey, to when the saint baptized the penguins. Later he will ask: 'Can I baptize a dog, if it is admittedly rational?' (31), and insist: 'We must distinguish the cases of a clergyman baptizing the wrong baby with the right name ... from those of saying "I baptize this infant 2704" or "I promise I will bash your face in" or appointing a horse as Consul' (34-5).¹¹⁶ Austin's lectures are repeatedly overtaken by what Simon Critchley, in his appraisal of the recurring tropes of humour in philosophy, calls 'the sudden and incongruous humanity of the animal'.¹¹⁷

Felman frames her enquiry, at the outset, under the heading 'the promising animal', asking 'what exactly are we doing when we say "I promise", and what are the consequences?' In his foreword to Felman's book, Cavell draws attention to the fact that Austin, in *How to Do Things With Words*, 'identifies speaking as *giving one's word*, as if an "I promise" implicitly lines every act of speech, of intelligibility, as it were *a condition of speech as such*'. For Austin, 'the act and concept of promising is not just one more among performative utterances', but one that is 'somehow privileged in Austin's view, naming as it were the fact of speech itself'.¹¹⁸ Such is the 'fact' of speech; what of the *scene* of promising? As is suggested by the idea that one might 'stand by' what one says (be it bravely, honourably, or stupidly), the question of taking responsibility for what you say (and what you do in saying) is unavoidably a question of

¹¹⁶ This is, presumably, an allusion to Incitatus, favourite horse of the Roman Emperor Gaius Caligula (AD 37-41). In his history of *The Twelve Caesars*, Suetonius writes, 'Incitatus owned a marble stable, an ivory stall, purple blankets and a jewelled collar, as well as a house, furniture and slaves – to provide suitable entertainment for guests whom Gaius invited in its name. It is said that he even planned to award Incitatus a consulship' (Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. by Robert Graves (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 174).

¹¹⁷ Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 31.

¹¹⁸ Cavell in Felman, p.xiii, emphasis added.

speech and the body. And it is a question of bodily *presence*.

If indeed a promise is the performative utterance *par excellence*, Felman argues that the promise of marriage is the *promise par excellence*. A 'necessary link' exists between the two:

If every marriage is, of course, a promise, every promise is to a certain extent a promise of marriage – to the extent that every promise promises *constancy* above all, continuity in time between the act of commitment and the future action.¹¹⁹

As Austin himself notes, in his twelfth and final Harvard lecture: 'Any speech act [commits us] at least to consistency' (154).

Sedgwick writes: the 'I do' of the marriage ceremony is the 'first and most influential, arguably the founding example of the explicit performative'.¹²⁰ Indeed, as I observed at the beginning of this chapter, the example of the marriage ceremony tends to offer itself as the most immediate, handiest recourse when one is called upon to explain Austin's theory of performative utterances. Sedgwick comments that 'fateful reliance of explicit performativity on *the exemplary*, on the single example' can so often result, in the retelling, 'in the contingency of philosophical and literary practice, the exemplarity of the marriage act itself'.¹²¹ For those working from queer perspectives, this is particularly problematic. However, Sedgwick references Felman's book when she asserts that, if you pay attention to what Austin *does* with his examples, 'the weird centrality of the marriage example for performativity in general isn't exactly a sign that this train of thought is foredoomed to stultification in sexual orthodoxy'. And, as Sedgwick reflects, inasmuch as 'most of the "I do"s in the book are offered as examples of the different ways things can go wrong with performative utterances',¹²² a more accurate name for *How to Do Things With*

¹¹⁹ Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, p. 20.

¹²⁰ Sedgwick, p. 70.

¹²¹ Sedgwick, p. 79.

¹²² Sedgwick, p. 71.

Words might have been '*How to say (or write) I do without winding up any more married than you started out*'.¹²³

The Christian marriage ceremony binds two people, two *bodies* together ('in sickness and in health, 'til death us do part'). The marriage vow is a promise to 'give' one's body to another, both in the sense of consummation and fidelity; the speech act promises to bring a body with it, in the future. At the very least, it is considered a public declaration of one's *intention* with regard to the union (and the fact that a fiancé is referred to as one's 'intended' suggests that the notion of an intention is strongly bound up in the convention of marriage). However, Felman argues that, when the body is the site of unconscious drives, or as Austin would say, 'mysterious internal machinery', a marriage vow promises on behalf of a body that *cannot* know what it is doing in so speaking. This is Felman's eponymous *scandal* of the speaking body. The scandal 'consists in the fact that the act cannot *know what it is doing*'.¹²⁴

If the human body is understood as a complicated and uncertain combination of drives, preoccupations, physical impulses, habitual actions and unconscious aims, then its action in the future *cannot* be *guaranteed* by a promise. Austin may not explicitly argue this, but he seems to tacitly intimate it in the way that he refers to, represents bodies. For example, he seems to be reflecting on the untenability of the promising body that promises a body, the idea that a body might be 'yours' to 'give' when, in the third lecture, he comments that an infelicitous speech act might include: "'I give", said when it is not mine to give or when it is a pound of my living and non-detached flesh'.¹²⁵

Felman stages her reading against the fictional frame of what she calls 'the Don Juan myth', which she draws from Molière's text,¹²⁶ a work of dramatic

¹²³ Sedgwick, p. 70.

¹²⁴ Felman, p. 67.

¹²⁵ Austin, p. 34.

¹²⁶ Felman directs readers of the English edition of her text to Molière, *Don Juan or the Statue at the Banquet*, trans. by Wallace Fowlie' (Great Neck, N.Y.: Barron's Educational series, 1964), but translates her own citations directly from Molière, *Oeuvres Completes* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1962).

literature, a play. This becomes particularly useful, within the context of my own attempt to unravel a ‘theatre/performativity conundrum’, which produces a series of reflections on the ‘illusion’ of the act of promising. According to Felman, the authority and value of ‘I promise...’ relies on a ‘referential illusion’,¹²⁷ in other words, the illusion that it refers, and refers truthfully, to an inner act (an act of the heart, or mind), one that is underwritten by the fullness of a conscious intention. However, it is not necessary that its speaker believe it (as Don Juan, compulsive promise-breaker, does not). Although she does not directly consider the implications of her theatrical example at any great length, Felman’s text is full of suggestions: as she observes, the meanings of the word ‘act’ are homologous with those of the word *performance* in English. For Felman, in the context of Austin’s emphasis on the marriage vow, the sexual connotation of this conjunction is difficult to ignore. As she notes, ‘Sexual “performance”, of course, constitutes one important connotation of the word “performance” in English; cf. the fashionable concept of “performance anxiety.”’¹²⁸ Felman emphasizes the sexual connotation of ‘performance’, but does not pursue the coincidence of the Austinian term ‘act’, as in speech act, and the theatrical connotation of what it is to ‘act’.

Alongside these vivid and persuasive appropriations of Austin’s writing, and of Austin’s performance, his figure – the philosopher, the man, a ‘highly comic figure’¹²⁹ – I wish to claim something of Austin for myself, and for Jackson *and* her director and dramaturg, sitting at their dinner table. My urgency for doing so is twofold. Firstly, as I have already signaled, my pleasure in his examples is not just a matter of passing, trivial enjoyment, but has implications for how we understand, talk about, and work with ‘performativity’ as not so much a theoretical concept, but as a way of operating. On this basis, I want to storm upon Jackson’s dinner table and insist ‘Austin is not what you think he is! Austin’s examples are not just the “I do” of the marriage ceremony!’ Secondly, I think Austin’s work, or rather the tools that I have had to develop in order to read it, cannot *but* equip me for the task of critically reappraising the place of

¹²⁷ Felman, p. 17.

¹²⁸ Felman, p. 133. See also pp. 76-80.

¹²⁹ Sedgwick, p. 71.

theatre, and the theatrical, within the discourse of performativity.

How do we turn our attention more directly to the theatrical? How to displace the Austin who would have 'roundly criticized' the director's assertion that performative utterance is 'like theatre'? What happens when we re-approach Austin's comments on the theatrical utterance, knowing what we now know about him – his voice, his relationship with seriousness, and his *practice* of exemplification? And what role in this for what I in particular enjoy about his work: the funny incongruity of the speaking body as it emerges from his examples? As I have already signaled, my aim here is not to refute the claim that Austin *theoretically* excluded the theatrical utterance, at least not in its own terms. Rather, it is to work through a different way of thinking about what it was that Austin was doing – with words, with performance. As part of this, my reflections are moving, imperceptibly but determinedly, toward a view of Austin's *own* performance, of the exemplary incongruity of *Austin's* speaking body.

9. The stage

What of Austin's own non-seriousness, then? As I have established, excuses are the means by which Austin problematizes human action. Against this, I wish to propose the following: jokes, the theme and the *claim* of joking, of non-seriousness, are the means by which he problematizes *speech* – including his own.

As we have seen, the idea that Austin excluded a whole class of utterances as 'non-serious' has been constructed on the basis of two key passages from *How to Do Things With Words*. One is the *offending paragraph*, the one containing his explicit description of an utterance 'spoken by an actor on the stage' as 'in a peculiar way hollow and void' (22). The other is his first mention of speaking seriously, which occurs earlier, in the first lecture:

Surely the words must be spoken 'seriously' and so as to be taken

‘seriously’. This is, though vague, true enough in general – it is an important commonplace in discussing the purport of any utterance whatsoever. I must not be joking, for example, nor writing a poem (9).

At this point, I contend that if excuses are the means by which Austin problematizes human action, then jokes – the theme and the claim of joking, or not being serious – are the means by which he problematizes speech. And, Austin’s comments on joking problematize his other comments, on theatrical speech. Comparing the two excerpts, we see that although the example of ‘a poem’ is common to both passages, Austin invokes the example of the theatre (by mentioning actor, stage and soliloquy) in only the second passage. And he mentions joking in the other. He does not mention joking and the theatrical utterance in proximity to one another. Furthermore, Austin’s tone in each of the passages is quite different: unlike his comments on the theatre, his earlier reference to joking is, conspicuously, spoken in the first-person: ‘I must not be joking, for example.’ This gives the comment the feel of a more off-handed remark, and indeed it occurs during what Austin flags as his ‘preliminary isolation of the performative’, before he starts on his taxonomic effort, when he is noting, speculatively, the possible implications of his identification of ‘a few simple utterances’ that are ‘quite plainly, *not* utterances which could be “true” or “false”’ (12).

More specifically, when Austin says, ‘Surely the words must be spoken “seriously” and so as to be taken “seriously”’ (his first uses of the ‘s-word’), he is fielding the imagined charge that his theory trivializes human action by saying that ‘to marry is to say a few words’ or ‘betting is simply saying something’. Austin acknowledges ‘such a doctrine sounds *odd* or even *flippant* at first’, adding that ‘with sufficient safeguards it may become not odd at all’ (7, emphasis added). He goes on to point out that ‘the uttering of the words [...] is far from being usually, even if it is ever, the *sole* thing necessary’ for a performative act to be successfully brought about (8), before acknowledging that this qualification will not entirely clear up the confusion, or error, a fairly stubborn common assumption about speech, because:

we may, in objecting, have something totally different, and this time quite mistaken in mind, especially when we think of the more awe-inspiring performatives such as “I promise to...” [...] we are apt to have a feeling that their being serious consists in their being uttered as (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 of the inward performance... Thus “I promise to...” obliges me – puts on record my spiritual assumption of a spiritual shackle (9-10).

Note how, on the page, that word ‘seriously’ is encased in scare quotes, twice. It is as if Austin cannot quite bring himself to take the word ‘seriously’ entirely seriously. Or else perhaps he is genuinely unnerved by it; as Cavell notes, and as we have seen, the ‘craving for profundity’ is Austin’s ‘mortal philosophical enemy’.¹³⁰ Moreover, ‘we are apt’ signals Austin’s acknowledgement that this is a habitual way of thinking about speech: this ‘craving for profundity’ infects everyday practice too, and can be detected in commonplaces such as ‘to solemnly swear’ or ‘speak from the heart’ or ‘speak one’s mind’, which imply a metaphysical oneness at the moment of utterance. The assumption is that words refer to and put across what is inside us, that they emanate from within us (speaking from the heart) and that a promise is not only, or primarily, a verbal act – it is first and foremost an inner spiritual act, of which the words are *merely* the report or description. It is this craving for profundity, this appeal for metaphysical unity, that results in what Austin dismisses as a wholly mistaken morality of speaking –

one who says ‘promising is not merely a matter of uttering words! It is an inward and spiritual act!’ is apt to appear as a solid moralist standing out against a generation of superficial theorizers: we see him as he sees himself, surveying the invisible depths of ethical space... Yet he provides the bigamist with an excuse for his ‘I do’ (10).

Austin is thus arguing, very clearly, that performative utterances cannot be judged on the basis of their truth or falsity. Performative utterances are not ‘merely constative reports of inward, silent actions’ (11); to utter the words ‘I

¹³⁰ Cavell, p. 54.

promise...’ *is itself* the action of promising – we can exclude ‘such fictitious inward acts’ as those we imagine being performed by the soul, heart, or any other such organ. In other words, because the performative ‘I promise...’ does what it says in the moment of saying, it names its own action, and refers only to itself. Austin strikes an emphatic note when, at the close of this passage, he states: ‘Accuracy and morality alike are on the side of the plain saying that *our word is our bond*’ (10).

However – and it is this acknowledgement that Derrida could not accept – Austin can be understood to acknowledge that, although ‘thoughts, feelings and intentions’ are not *essential* to the ‘success’ or ‘felicity’ of a performative, the *idea* that a speaker *must* have certain thoughts, feelings and intentions *is* a factor in the speech act of promising. As Austin reflects, ‘do we not actually, when such intention is absent, speak of a “false” promise?’ Crucially, a promise spoken without requisite sincerity, or seriousness, is not null or void – it still *promises* – but we might well speak of this kind of promise as ‘professed’ or ‘hollow’, we might well feel cheated by it. Austin finds this notion important – or unsettling – enough to illustrate using a reference to classical literature:

The classic expression of this idea is to be found in the *Hippolytus* (l.612), where Hippolytus says [*he cites it here in the original Greek*] i.e. ‘my tongue swore to... but my heart (or mind or other backstage artiste) did not’ (9-10).

It is Cavell who first drew my attention to this reference, from the Euripides play, which, as he points out, went uncommented for many years. Neither Derrida, nor Felman, nor, until recently, Cavell himself considered the significance of this allusion. Perhaps this is because it is move that appears contradictory, on Austin’s part, for several reasons. As Cavell notes, ‘It seems to make no sense to say that deliberately superficial, witty, mocking Austin, would be inscribing the relation of his work on performative utterances to the realm of the tragic’.¹³¹ It might be added that Austin does not merely make a literary allusion here, but explicitly refers to the *theatrical act*, and the backstage personnel who support

¹³¹ Cavell, p. 53.

(or subvert it). In Cavell's reading, the distinction Hippolytus seeks to draw between tongue and heart represents for Austin 'a metaphysical dodge, or a deviously motivated attempt at one, between saying and intending'.¹³² I do not refute this, and indeed it supports my earlier critique of Derrida's reading of the place of intention in Austin's work. However, in the context of the current discussion, it is impossible to ignore the fact that Austin is modeling such a key point about seriousness with reference to a work of literature, and one of the kind that he later appears to exclude most explicitly from his consideration – a play text. More specifically, this example evokes the *scene* of the theatrical *utterance* through that curious, parenthesized, reference to the 'backstage artiste'. Why does Austin go this far? There is no need for him to acknowledge the theatricality of this reference, the fact that Euripides wrote these words to be 'spoken by an actor on the stage' so explicitly. Is he allowing himself to be distracted into this joking depiction of the speaking body? In a footnote, he goes further: 'But I do not mean to rule out all the offstage performers – the lights men, the stage manager, even the prompter; I am objecting only to certain officious understudies, who would duplicate the play' (10).

Now that we know a thing or two about Austin's enjoyment of the figure of the clumsy, calamitous body, it should come as no surprise that he cannot resist transforming his allusion to Greek tragedy into something less than solemn. Through the example of Hippolytus, Austin conjures an image of the speech act as a theatrical production beset by an officious understudy who, superfluous to the events onstage, nevertheless insists upon 'duplicating' the play. It seems that Austin cannot resist elaborating on the metaphor of the theatre, and in so doing emphasizes the play's physical staging rather than its textual meaning.¹³³ Austin's Hippolytus example dramatizes the scene of speech not as high mythic tragedy, but as a somewhat overwrought theatrical production, a comedy of errors. It is as if he is reminding us that the supposed solemnity of the (theatrical) occasion of promising is ever vulnerable to 'noises off'.

¹³² Cavell, p. 76.

¹³³ In light of this, we might speculate as to whether the comments that appear as footnotes in the published text were spoken as part of the lectures, or whether they were added afterwards. It is tempting to imagine them as transcriptions of Austin's ad-libbed asides.

Does this offer a way of reconstructing the kind of *theatricality* that did interest Austin, indeed that which I might go so far as to suggest is an unavoidable part of his theory, and his practice? A theatricality marked by the apprehension (indeed appreciation) of its *illusion* as somehow vulnerable, always, to the incursion of the body? That is, to the inherent comedy of a body that *pretends* to mean what it says, that always *might* (happen to) be speaking the truth, but whose declarations may be *taken seriously* whether or not it is ‘truth-telling’ or ‘lying’ or ‘pretending’ or ‘under duress’ (or some uncertain combination of all these things).

Austin’s reference to Hippolytus, with its funny-incongruous depiction of the body in the act of speech, can be productively considered as an instance of the self-subverting pleasure Austin takes in moments of exemplification. In Austin’s hands, Euripides’ line speaks less of the tragedy of the promise, which is binding above all else, and more of the comedy of Hippolytus’ excuse. ‘My tongue swore to but my heart did not’ – as if this unruly tongue were somehow working of its own accord regardless of the (silent) protestations of the heart. Here, we begin to see how a problem of moral philosophy coincides with the comic effect of incongruity. This comic effect also highlights the extent to which the moral question of the promising body coincides with a problem of linguistic reference. For what is the relationship of the word tongue to the physical thing of the tongue? They are absolutely separable, and yet absurdly overlaid in the act of speech. The one is shaped by the other. There is literally no distance between them and yet the one does not seem to be identical with the other. If the tongue does not speak on behalf of the heart, what agency is making it move? What agency is making it move when it refers to its own action, as the tongue makes the movements to shape the breath that sounds the word ‘tongue’?

As Felman demonstrates, the incongruous interrelation of speech and the body is felt most acutely in the case of promising, which is the performative utterance par excellence, and in the example of marriage, which *stages* the scandal of the speaking body. Why scandal? Because there is ‘an *illusion* of constancy

inherent in the promise',¹³⁴ but it is an illusion only. As the Don Juan myth demonstrates, it is not necessary that its speaker believe his own promise for that promise to be *taken* seriously, as a solemn commitment, by those around him. Crucially, this illusion of constancy relies on a *referential* illusion –

the seducer's strategy is to create, in a linguistic space that he controls [...] a *referential illusion* through an utterance that is by its nature *self-referential*: the illusion of a real or extralinguistic act of commitment created by an utterance that refers only to itself.¹³⁵

Don Juan's promise relies on the referential illusion that the words 'I promise...' refer to the 'extra-linguistic' action of a unified, solemn speaking body, sound of mind, true of heart. It implies there is absolute harmony between the external and internal action, between body and soul, flesh and mind. When in fact, the verb 'promise' refers to a reality *it itself instigates*. Thus, Austin's performative theory levels a challenge to the 'traditional conception of the referent' (as advanced, for example, by Saussurian linguistics), by envisaging the referent as that which is 'produced by language as its own *effect*'. And, as Felman perceptively argues:

This means that between language and referent there is no longer a simple opposition (nor is there identity, on the other hand): language makes itself part of what it refers to (without, however, being all that it refers to). Referential knowledge of language is not knowledge *about* reality (about a separate and distinct entity), but knowledge that *has to do with reality*, that acts within reality, since it is itself – at least in part – what this reality is made of.¹³⁶

Because the performative 'I promise...' does what it says in the moment of saying, it names its own action, and refers only to its own verb, 'promise', rather than to some element of the body, the self, or what Austin calls 'the complex internal machinery we use in "acting"'.¹³⁷ The referential illusion on which the emotional power of promise relies requires a body to uphold it. This illusion

¹³⁴ Felman, p. 20.

¹³⁵ Felman, p. 17.

¹³⁶ Felman, p. 51.

¹³⁷ Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 179.

depends on the fact that the promise *is itself* a bodily act – it requires the presence of a body. Not only to physically produce the speech (we know that ‘speech’ can be (re)produced by machines, or parrots), but to *stand as* the referent of the ‘I’, the body that consists in the substance in which we imagine the ‘promise’ to take place. In the case of a marriage promise, the body also *stands* as the guarantee – literally, what is being offered *against* the promise, what the speaking self is ceremonially ‘handing over’ (to the beloved and, in the same gesture, to the *state* of marriage, which is itself state-sanctioned).

Therefore, the illusion of constancy depends on the fact that the promise *is itself* a bodily act – it requires a body to stand there and physically produce the speech. And, the body standing there appears as the *referent* of the utterance, a strange doubling – the organ that speaks the ‘I’ also *acts* (or, we might say, *stands*) as its referent. Austin's Hippolytus reference, and the way he jokingly undermines its solemnity with reference to the clumsy mechanics of the theatrical production, short-circuits this referential illusion. On this basis, it becomes possible to surmise that the referential illusion of the promise is comparable to the illusion of theatrical naturalism. According to this grand illusion, everything is unfolding in organic oneness, each utterance is an originary moment of speech, and the ‘truth’ of the character can be made present through the harmonious collusion of every element. But Austin's reference to Hippolytus undoes this. It allows us to sense the incongruity of the idea of a tongue working on its own. And then, the parenthesized, apparently jokey reference to the ‘backstage artiste’, which institutes an odd-sounding, awkward metaphor of the speaker as the combined personnel of a theatrical *production* implies that speech itself is, even (or perhaps especially) in its most ‘awe-inspiringly’ serious instances, a complicated, conflicted, comically theatrical and unavoidably physical production.

10. Austin performing Austin

At this point, let us re-approach *the figure of Austin* who appears at Jackson's dinner table: the guy who was so roundly dismissive of theatre, who

exacerbated the awkwardness between the academic and the practitioners, who made Jackson's job that much harder. This guy is the originator of an influential theory of speech that, at its inception, excluded the theatrical utterance as 'hollow and void' and 'parasitic'. Now let us ask: can this figure survive the kind of reading we've been doing here? And if, as I suspect, the answer is no, then what kind of figure, what kind of philosopher, what kind of guy, takes his place?

Does Austin's work perpetuate (even without intending to) an anti-theatrical prejudice? Not in the way that is often assumed: Austin did *not* draw a defining distinction between serious and non-serious utterances, at least not the kind that would support a categorical exclusion of the theatrical utterance. Contrary to Derrida's defender of the values of 'seriousness', the Austin that has emerged from my own encounter with him is a merciless deconstructor of false seriousness, is himself a critic of the metaphysics of presence. With this in mind, we may reflect that the more subtly problematic of Austin's comments on the theatrical utterance is not the one concerning its 'parasitism', but that which describes it, with emphasis, as '*in a peculiar way hollow and void*' (22). As I have argued, for Austin, 'hollow and void' is not necessarily a negative quality. Rather, it is an emptying of the illusory 'fullness' of the utterance that seems to refer to a totally present and unified heart, soul, inner act. Moreover, Austin himself tends to say things *in a peculiar way* and is interested in the *peculiar ways* of speech. He repeatedly and curiously emphasizes 'ways' in such a way as to suggest that peculiarity seems to be endlessly interesting to him: when reflecting on 'Conditions for Happy Performatives', he observes there are 'considerable differences between "ways" of being unhappy' (15); and by his account, excuses are uttered as a means of saying, in effect: 'I did it but only *in a way*, not just flatly like that'.¹³⁸

But did I, in my early appraisal of Jackson's scene, somewhat over-emphasize the degree to which her difficulties can be ascribed to Austin himself? Arguably, what Jackson is finding awkward here is not *specific* to J.L. Austin, or an

¹³⁸ Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 187.

attempt to explain *his* work, but has more to do with her awkwardness at occupying the *position* of the academic at the table. What makes her awkward is, by her own admission, the ‘occupational divide’ that separates artists from academics. This is a divide that – she feels and fears – operates like a class divide. By her own admission, Jackson ‘take[s] seriously critiques of the professional intellectual’ (Jackson: 5), in particular citing John Guillory’s suggestion ‘that the phenomenon of the intellectual rests upon an opposition to manual labour’.¹³⁹ She links this explicitly to her awkward conversation about performativity: ‘As much as the opposition between “theory” and “practice” is erroneous, as much as both terms have a hugely complicated set of references, it would be disingenuous to ignore the fact this conversation took place across different occupational positions.’¹⁴⁰ For Jackson, the so-called ‘performative turn’ has produced a disciplinary crisis within theatre and performance studies precisely in its exacerbation of this professional divide: ‘performative’ is the trendy term that seems to say *like a performance* and yet – as only the initiated know – excludes theatrical performance. The scholar who insists on this is liable to sound pernicky to the practitioner, the practitioner who casually disregards it ill-informed to the scholar. However, as I hope I have demonstrated, Austin’s work is not ‘theoretical’ in the sense this implies. By demonstrating that Austin is not, does not behave as a ‘theorist’, at least not in the sense that Jackson ascribes to him, I am not proposing that I have provided a ‘correction’ of Jackson’s understanding. Nor am I claiming to have magically overcome the professional divide that makes Jackson so awkward. However, I am arguing that a sense of Austin’s *practice* as both a philosopher and a performer can help open up the ‘theoretical’ concept of performativity *to* performance. Sedgwick captures this sense of Austin’s practice evocatively when she writes:

Clearly for Austin, taxonomic work with particular sentences is not a rigid, Searlean reification of performativity, but rather the filthy *workshop* of its creation, criss-crossed with skid marks, full of dichotomies that are ‘in need, like so many dichotomies, of elimination’ (149); it represents the

¹³⁹ Jackson, *Professing Performance*, p. 5. See also John Guillory, ‘Literary Critics as Intellectuals,’ *Rethinking Class: Literary Studies and Social Formations*, eds. Wai Chee Dimock and Michael T. Gilmore (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 107-149.

¹⁴⁰ Jackson, pp.5-6.

painful, not-yet-differentiated quick from which the performative emerges.¹⁴¹

The kind of ‘workshop’ Sedgwick invokes is one I think of less as a place of manual work, more as a process of theatrical labour: Austin does his philosophizing out loud, on stage, and he implicates and involves himself (his voice, his position, his *figure*) in that process. Crucially, Austin conducts his philosophizing by *example* rather than argument, or philosophical reference, and his most famous examples (which include: ‘I promise...’, ‘I bequeath...’, ‘I bet...’, ‘I name this ship...’, ‘I sentence you...’, and ‘I do...’) are, at first, as Sedgwick observes, presented as ‘pure, originary, and defining for the concept of the performative’. And although eventually Austin dismisses them as no more than ‘a marginal limiting case’ (150), they are, she notes, ‘reverted to over and over, as if no argument or analysis, no deconstruction or dismantlement could really vitiate or even challenge the self-evidence of their exemplary force’.¹⁴²

A recurrent complaint about Austin’s conception of performative utterances is that it remains over-indebted to the first-person. Austin writes that ‘actions can only be performed by persons and obviously in our case the utterer must be the performer’ (60). As Sedgwick notes, ‘Foucauldian, Marxist, deconstructive, psychoanalytic and other recent theoretical projects have battered at the self-evidence of that “obviously”’.¹⁴³ However, it might be noted that, since Austin reverts to these exemplary utterances over and over, and since he was doing his philosophizing via the medium of a lecture, a speech performance, Austin would have had to repeatedly *speak* his own exemplary utterances. Austin *keeps saying them*, these exemplary performative utterances, these sentences in first-person, present indicative, active voice. And the repetition of these kinds of exemplary utterances might well have generated a doubtfulness about the ‘obviousness’ of the first-person pronoun that does not come through in quite the same way on the page. Imagine, for example, hearing (and seeing) the following line spoken aloud:

¹⁴¹ Sedgwick, p.17, emphasis added.

¹⁴² Sedgwick, p. 4.

¹⁴³ Sedgwick, p. 77.

Thus, when I say 'I promise' and have no intention of keeping it, I have promised but... (16)

He must allow his audience to catch a sense of how such a sentence would sound in use. Austin must recite this exemplary utterances *as it might be said*, and in so doing, say it himself. Perhaps it is possible to read in Austin's text not only an enjoyment of examples, but an enjoyment of *saying* examples. That is, an enjoyment of speaking a performative as it *might* be spoken. Note, for example, the emphasis in the following line:

'There is a bull in the field' may or may not be a warning, for I *might* just be describing the scenery (33)

Would that emphasis have been audible in Austin's speech performance? Would the speech marks have been notionally hovering when Austin pronounced his ambiguous 'warning' about the bull? This indeterminacy it itself rather enjoyable, a little bit funny. Perhaps this funniness (whether or not entirely intentional on Austin's part) complicates Austin's assertion that 'obviously in our case the utterer must be the performer' (60). In many cases, what I imagine Austin's voicing of his examples would have done is mobilized the inherent incongruity of Austin's *own* speaking body, which would have 'stood' as the exemplary body of this curious, discomfiting and (above all?) funny effect. Unexpectedly, it is imagining Austin's *own* first-person performance of his first-person examples that problematizes the apparently 'obvious' centrality of the first-person to his theory.

In the texts of his lectures, published posthumously, Austin's presence is felt in a number of displaced and metaphorical ways. Many of his examples carry an unmistakable sense of comic timing, one that works just as well in writing as in speech, but which pulls me into a sense, vague and yet unmistakable, of what it might have been like to be a member of Austin's audience.

The boundaries between 'inappropriate persons' and 'inappropriate circumstances' will necessarily not be a very hard and fast one... But we

must distinguish between cases where the inappropriateness of persons, objects, names, &c. is a matter of 'incapacity' and simpler cases where the object or 'performer' is of the wrong kind or type [...] Thus we must distinguish the cases of a clergyman baptising the wrong baby with the right name or baptising a baby 'Albert' instead of 'Alfred', from those of saying 'I baptise this infant 2704' or 'I promise I will bash your face in' or appointing a horse as Consul (34-5).

In the above passage, Austin is holding his readers (and I imagine, his listeners) in suspense, and then pulling them up short with a joke. There is a game going on, too, involving the first- and second-person pronouns, the pronouns of address:

We turn next to the infringements of A. 2, the type of infelicity which we have called Misapplications. Examples here are legion. 'I appoint you', said when you have already been appointed, or when someone else has been appointed, or when I am not entitled to appoint, or when you are a horse (34).

Austin's words continue to *do things* on the page: 'when *you* are a horse', or 'can *I* baptize a dog?' When I read these phrases, I feel like Austin is addressing *me*. I am metaphorically 'there', pulled into the example along with Austin, or the figural version of him. As a reader, I am called to the scene of the example in a physical way. I imagine the exemplary scene, in some sense step *into* it, a risky thing to do when I am liable to get my face bashed in, or be transformed, momentarily, into a horse. Purely for the purposes of exemplification, mind you.

Whether or not Austin intended to place his own body at the centre of his theorizing, the fact that he was speaking a lecture *about* first-person utterances, in person, arguably means that in some sense it was unavoidable that he would do so. As I survey my favourite of Austin's examples, it seems that many of the most vivid, memorable or funny ones, the ones I find myself reverting to over and over, have to do with the question of what it is to be in the *wrong* place. If many of Austin's most incongruous, funny examples, the ones featuring animals, are explicitly concerned with what it is to be appointed, anointed or

otherwise put in the position of speaking, this resonates with Shannon Jackson's awkwardness in occupying the position of authority, the position from which a certain kind of speech is expected. However, and here is a tension at the heart of Austin's work and legacy: Austinian performativity, as commonly summarized, remains tied to the handful of central, defining examples that Austin gathered at the beginning of his first lecture. In full, they read:

'I do [take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife]' – as uttered in the marriage ceremony.

'I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*' – as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stem.

'I give and bequeath my watch to my brother' – as occurring in a will.

'I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow'. (5)

Sedgwick alludes to the 'prestige' of such examples,¹⁴⁴ capturing something not only of the critical currency this group of utterances has acquired as a result of Austin's influence, but also of their official, ceremonial nature. The first two cases are explicit, ceremonial performatives requiring a person of requisite authority or status, and the correct performance of a procedure. Taken together with the third, they speak of the establishment and the perpetuation of its laws via a structure of (male) heredity. These examples also illustrate a set of procedures and values that is peculiarly British; not only queen and country, navy and brotherhood, but also, tellingly, speculation about the weather. Now, it may be that these values were so *natural* to Austin, in the 1950s, at Oxford, that he did not think twice about promoting them in his examples. It *may* be that Austin, on his trip to Harvard, was playing up his image as a 'quirky, eccentric Oxford don', caricaturing himself and a certain stereotypical Englishness. He certainly has an ear for the silly particularity of certain customs, and appears to take a certain relish in casting himself in little vignettes. This, for example, from 'A Plea for Excuses': 'You dropped the tea tray: Certainly, but an emotional storm was about to break out: or, yes, but there was a wasp'.¹⁴⁵

In either case, as we have seen, as Austin's lectures go on, the detail which

¹⁴⁴ Sedgwick, p. 68.

¹⁴⁵ Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 176.

inhabits these examples becomes increasingly incongruous. Austin's exemplary work is tuned, increasingly, to demonstrate the various unpredictable and peculiar ways a performative utterance might fail, not quite fail, or succeed in some peculiarly unsatisfactory or disconcerting way. And, as the lectures go on, the imaginative zeal with which Austin enumerates possible aberrations, exceptions, and anomalies seems to grow all the more unruly and peculiar. Unavoidably, Austin must illustrate these aberrations using his *own* first-person, his figure. Due to his thematization of the first-person present indicative utterance, Austin cannot help but *perform* his examples, and in the process, make an example of himself. As a result, Austin's examples in some sense bring Austin himself into the scene – and so aspects of his identity, his particularity (his being a man, an English man, an Oxford man, a man who raised pigs as a hobby). And at the same time, they demonstrate how his position can be unfixed by the peculiar operations of his own language. As I have argued, this amounts to a thorough and insistent problematization of the referential illusion of the first-person, and of the presence and authority of Austin, of his standing (literally, in front of those people at Harvard in 1955) *as a philosopher*.

The final words of Austin's final lecture at Harvard call attention, curiously, to his equivocality as to his own status *as philosopher*:

In these lectures, then, I have been doing two things which I do not altogether like doing. These are:

- (1) producing a programme, that is, saying what ought to be done rather than doing something;
- (2) lecturing.

However, as against (1), I should very much like to think that I have been sorting out a bit the way things have already begun to go and are going with increasing momentum in some parts of philosophy, rather than proclaiming an individual manifesto. And as against (2), I should certainly like to say that nowhere could, to me, be a nicer place to lecture than Harvard (164).

In this chapter, I have attempted to understand (and enjoy) the ways in which

Austin's work *stages* the problem of speech and performance. Stages, that is, in a metaphorical sense. What I hope has emerged from this is that, rather than offering a generally applicable theory (of language, speech or performance) based on the clear distinction between serious and non-serious utterances, Austin's work stages the uncertain and unstable relationship between the two.

Austin's closing comments tell us something about how the manner of his performance was instrumental to his philosophical project, or rather his project of questioning the grounds of a philosopher's authority. The very final word of his lecture, 'Harvard,' is an acknowledgement of the situatedness of his speech act. For all the emphasis upon the scene of Austin's address, very little of that actual scene has come into focus. Yes, we know it was a lecture room with a dwindling occupancy. But, on these pages at least, 'Harvard' is itself a sort of abstraction – rather than a tangible place it is a proper name denoting academic prestige. Just as a name like 'J.L. Austin' can be invoked at a dinner table, a speech act that firms up the authority of one person over another, so too can a name like 'Harvard'. A practitioner of performance, one who is concerned with the pragmatics of the scene, might argue that my use of the word 'performance' in this chapter remains horribly, academically abstract; without a tangible sense of the actual room, and without description of Austin's actual face, a sense of his physical demeanor, what kind of concrete tangibility does his 'performance' have on these pages? These are concerns that will be carried over into the following chapter, which offers an extended reading of another sort of transcript – the text of a comic routine by Stewart Lee, a man whose face, body and performance it *is* possible for me to describe. What might now have become clear is that the recourse to a particular, named, even prestigious and famous body's *performance* of speech does not amount to a reductive insistence upon the authority of some kind of organizing *intention*. In fact, reading a text as the performance of a speaking body may help to destabilize those spurious yet persistent myths that elevate certain bodies to the status of author-figures, and prestigious 'originators' of concepts, movements or schools of thought.

CHAPTER 2:

Literalising figures: Stewart Lee, deconstruction, and the Tea Cosy

1. Not laughing: me at the gig

Sitting in between groups of people drinking beer from plastic glasses, looking toward the stage onto which Stewart Lee was about to make his entrance, I felt conspicuous. It was November 2013, just over a year into my PhD. A year spent thinking, reading and speaking about Stewart Lee. And writing, or trying to write, some sort of scholarly account of his work, his jokes. Writing in particular about one joke. A joke about a tea cosy. Writing what would, many drafts later, become part of the chapter you are about to read. The location was the Leicester Square Theatre, where Lee was performing nightly, rotating half-hour segments that would provide the material for series three of his BBC2 show *Comedy Vehicle*. I had come to see Stewart Lee because I was writing about him, and when he appeared onstage and the applause subsided and he began to speak, it made me feel slightly odd, as though I had somehow brought my own example to life, and was now willing it to behave as it should. I was willing that figure up there, the one called Stewart Lee, to be funny, be interesting, be worthy of a PhD chapter. For a spectator at a stand-up gig, this was an awkward predicament: for my previous year's work to have any value, I *needed* Stewart Lee to be funny, and yet, as the gig began, I began to worry that my previous year's work seemed to have made it difficult for me to *find* Stewart Lee funny. I wasn't laughing. I was thinking too much, perhaps. Anyway, it was disconcerting.

What was it that made my presence at the gig, in the audience, feel not only weird, uncomfortable, but somehow untenable? Perhaps it was something to do with the tea cosy. Or rather, the considerable amount of time I had spent thinking and writing about the joke, or perhaps it is more accurate to say the routine, the 'bit' – the four-or-so-minutes during which Stewart Lee had talked about, and then, for a moment or two, talked *as*, a tea cosy. The routine was from Stewart Lee's 2004 show, *Stand-Up Comedian*, a transcript of which, with Lee's annotations, was published by Faber and Faber in 2010. This is how I

came to read it; that's right, I read *Stand-Up Comedian*, and the tea cosy routine. I read it in a book. And then I spent the best part of a year working out *how* to read it, by which I mean, how to produce a close analysis of what I found to be going on in it. This analysis will take up much of the latter part of this chapter.

Many would argue that it is a category error to subject the *text* of a stand-up routine to extended close reading. For that matter, is it not some kind of mistake to read a transcript of a stand-up routine in the first place? 'A joke is funny if and only if you laugh at it,' writes theorist John Limon in his definition of stand-up.¹ I *might* laugh at a joke on paper, but reading is, for the most part, a solitary and silent activity. My laugh may well be internal. In any case, it is something I do alone, in the privacy of my room. But the joke I am reading was developed as part of stand-up *routine*, which is the name I will adopt to mean the next unit of material up from a joke (broadly speaking, a routine is made up of jokes, and a show is made up of routines). A stand-up joke is thus, usually, not self-contained. The experience of stand-up is collective and relational: as Limon notes, in stand-up, 'The peculiarities of the relationship between joke teller and audience do not make the joke *seem* more or less funny; they *make* the joke more or less funny'.² Furthermore, according to Limon, 'the collective experience of humour, like the personal experience of pain, fills its moment and perishes; reflection misprizes it of necessity'.³

I did, for the record, manage to overcome my initial awkwardness, at the gig. To my relief, I did laugh. A few minutes into the gig, I found myself laughing quite by surprise. It was a particular line (about two rats fighting over a courgette that has fallen into a urinal) that got me. But my attempts to write about this gig, this experience of laughing, have come to nothing. And anyway, I was already committed to the attempt to write about the tea cosy. So, in this chapter I am not interested in laughter itself, or even very much concerned with the scene of the comedy gig. I *am* interested, in part, in how the feelings experienced in the

¹ Limon, p.12.

² Limon, p. 12.

³ Limon, p. 11.

moment of laughing can get displaced into a weirdly intense affection for the idea of the funny, fuzzy or otherwise silly *thing* that you associate with the joke. This relates to the fact that, long after the laughter has perished, and long after I have forgotten most of the words that Lee said onstage that night, the courgette remains.

The funniness that I am responding to in this chapter – funniness generated by the figure of a tea cosy (and, as I will explain, the figure of Stewart Lee as a tea cosy) – is not unrelated to the feeling of laughing, suddenly, at a courgette. Although in the case of the tea cosy my feeling emanated from (and was sustained by) a moment of reading, as I will demonstrate, it nonetheless has something to tell us about the pleasure of laughing along with other people, in a room, at the same moment, at a courgette. In turn, the problem of the peculiarly tenacious funniness of the tea cosy and the courgette, will, in this chapter, open onto a series of problems – methodological and ethical – that relate to the task of reading.

Before embarking upon this reading, this reading of and with the tea cosy, it will be necessary to work through a set of questions about stand-up comedy – as a performance form in itself, and as a form of performance that has its own surrounding discourse. As stand-up makes a place for itself in university drama departments, its definition is at stake. The question of how to define stand-up is often posed as one of aesthetics versus professionalism: is stand-up an artform, or is it ‘just’ a job? What any of this has to do with the funny, fuzzy and weirdly fascinating figure of a tea cosy, will, I hope, become increasingly clear.

2. A serious business: aesthetics and professionalism

Writing the foreword to the second edition of Oliver Double's *Getting the Joke*, which he calls 'a serious book by Britain's foremost comedy academic', comedian Ross Noble worries that it might be seen as 'a tad pretentious to describe stand-up in artistic terms', not least because 'it is so populist', associated as it is with the 'lucrative areas of the entertainment world', but

moreover, 'when it is done well it looks so effortless and natural, that it appears as if the performer is not doing anything, merely joining the audience in a moment that would naturally have happened'. This is why, he suggests, 'stand-up is not taken seriously as an artform'. But, he adds, 'this book explores stand-up as it should be, as a true art, and uncovers the mechanics and mysteries of creating it'.⁴

Ross Noble seems to be arguing that stand-up should be taken seriously as an art form. But that does not mean that it is a 'serious art form'. John Limon considers stand-up's non-seriousness to be its defining point:

Because it is plausible to assert that an audience is wrong about, say, an opera (critics will judge) or a novel (posterity will judge), opera and literature can stake claims to seriousness. To be serious means to despise the audience – to reserve the right of appeal to a higher jurisdiction.⁵

This is quite a serious charge to level against 'serious' art forms – that they despise their audiences. If you are 'wrong' about a serious artform, for example, if you called the symphony beautiful when actually you were 'seduced by the loveliness of the evening or the lyric athleticism of the conductor', then you are liable to be 'retroactively disabused by a critic'. But the audience's laughter, being 'the single end of stand-up' is 'single-minded and unimpeachable'.⁶

'Let's start with the fact that I've got a bit of weird job,' Double begins the first chapter of *Getting the Joke*.⁷ He is referring to the fact that he teaches stand-up comedy in a university. Double has been a lecturer in Drama at the University of Kent in Canterbury since 1999, where his research and teaching specialism is stand-up, or 'anything in which the performer works straight out to the audience, performing in the first person and the present tense'.⁸ Before that, he was a

⁴ Ross Noble, 'Foreword' in Double, *Getting the Joke*, pp. ix-xii (pp. x-ix).

⁵ Limon, p. 12.

⁶ Limon, p. 12.

⁷ Double, *Getting the Joke*, p. 1.

⁸ University of Kent, 'Staff Profiles: Dr Oliver Double', <<https://www.kent.ac.uk/arts/staff-profiles/drama/double.html>> [accessed 16 May 2016].

professional stand-up comedian on the national comedy circuit. I saw him get up to introduce the keynote speaker at a conference once, and he did it as though he was the warm-up act. On the back cover, Double's book is trailed as 'a must read for aspiring stand-up comedians, comedy fans and academics researching and teaching Comedy Practice and Performance Studies'. Do academics sit awkwardly in this list, alongside the aspiring comedians and comedy fans? Or was that only *this* academic, sitting awkwardly alongside comedy fans at the Stewart Lee gig in Leicester Square?

As I stated in my Introduction, Stewart Lee has published a book too, a different sort of book. By publishing transcripts of three of his stand-up shows with Faber & Faber, an imprint noted for its literary credentials, Lee would appear to be inviting what he does to be read, and taken seriously, as literature. He discussed the relationship of his work to literature in a talk he gave at Edmund Hall, University of Oxford, framing it in terms of the discrepancy between the kind of work he puts in, and the work he is perceived by audiences to have done:

What I do is I spend a year pulling together a two-hour show, which to me is obviously a construct because it's got dramatic irony, character development as I change over the two hours, a beginning, a middle and an end, recurrent themes, an incident at the end that echoes an incident at the beginning, the same things being told from different angles that deliberately echo each other, even some bit of set that does something and still people come up to me afterwards and say "so I suppose you just go out there and make it all up as you go along do you?"⁹

What Lee is talking about here is comparable to the predicament Noble outlines at the start of his Foreword: 'To the casual observer I as a stand-up comic spend my time onstage just dicking about and showing off'.¹⁰ It is worth noting that, at the University of Oxford, Lee is speaking as 'Honorary Fellow and alumnus' and so shares in the prestige of the institution. But, as a stand-up comedian, he feels he needs to make a special case for the artistic value of

⁹ Stewart Lee, 'On Not Writing', online video recording, YouTube, 3 July 2013, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrXVaytvJtQ>> [accessed 23 October 2013].

¹⁰ Noble, p. ix.

what he does. On the experience of contributing to a day of talks themed around 'A Celebration of Writing', Lee reflects, 'Some people were very comfortable with the idea that what they did was worthwhile, others like me had to justify that what we did had some merit as literature'.¹¹

As they embark upon giving an account of what they do in the context of academia, both Noble and Lee seem conscious of the risk that it will be assumed they are just messing around, making it up as they go along, and thus in some sense not even aware of what they are doing, or how they are doing it. Noble mitigates this anxiety by telling his readers about how he and Double share 'a genuine passion for understanding and discussing the inner workings of comedy', referring to their 'prolonged dissection of a routine of a long forgotten music hall comic'.¹² He admits to taking pleasure in seeing people back away from such conversations, and expresses surprise 'that people think that a group of comics sitting around talking about comedy would be hilarious'. Instead, he likens what is going on in such discussions to a 'bunch of chefs talking about creating recipes'.¹³ This is slightly different to the literary mode of Lee's account; Noble prefers to frame the discussion that goes on between comedians as one that is both professionalized and pragmatic, technical and slightly nerdy. It's not funny, but neither is it serious in the way that risks sounding, to use Noble's term, *pretentious*.

Stand-up comedians do things with words for a living. It is interesting, then, to consider how they frame the various kinds of activities associated with their profession. Lee argues for his stand-up to be recognized as writing, calling attention to his process, the amount of time it takes. When set against the apparent casualness of stand-up, a comedian's revelation of the time-consuming laboriousness of creating jokes can function as its own joke. It is entertaining, for example, to watch Jerry Seinfeld, in a video for the *New York Times* online, talk about how it took him a full two years to perfect a short routine about Pop Tarts. 'It's a long time to spend on something that means

¹¹ Lee, 'On Not Writing'.

¹² Noble, p. ix.

¹³ Noble, p. ix.

absolutely nothing. But that's what I do. That's what people want me to do.' He shows his notes, scrawled onto yellow notepaper with many crossings-out and corrections, explaining 'I'm looking for the connective tissue that gives me the really tight smooth link... like a jigsaw puzzle... and if it's too long, if it's just that split-second too long, you will shave letters off of words, you count syllables to get it just...' He trails off, before resorting to a musical metaphor: 'It's like songwriting.'¹⁴

Stand-up comedians themselves do not always understand how or why a joke works, or fails to work, and they often freely admit this. Lee, recounting how, during the Edinburgh run of *Stand-Up Comedian*, he spent several weeks, night after night, trying to get a punchline to work, trying out different combinations of words, reflects that the way 'some apparently random objects seem utterly apposite and some don't... is almost alchemical beyond reason'.¹⁵ And Noble, thinking about how it feels when stand-up is working, describes the moment 'where hundreds of people all feel the same joy and release of laughter at the same time' as something 'thrilling and magical' that can make comedians appear 'like strange aliens, alchemists of the imagination'.¹⁶ It is notable that, at their most (apparently) mystified at the strange workings of their craft, these comedians resort to similar metaphors: magic, alchemy, that which is beyond reason. It seems that, the more mystified the comedian, the further their rhetoric strays from the pragmatic, the workmanlike.

Stand-up comedians, quite understandably, want to make a case for their specialism, their expertise, and their mastery of a difficult mode of performance. As Noble puts it, 'all the elements must come together, the ideas, the performance and the environment must perfectly align and the comic must merge these elements perfectly, controlling and timing everything just right'.¹⁷ The other side of this is that stand-ups *do also* seem to feel that the ungraspable mysteriousness of what they do – or, I might add, what their

¹⁴ 'Jerry Seinfeld Interview: How to Write a Joke | The New York Times', YouTube, 20 December 2012 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itWxXyCfW5s>> [accessed 8 August 2016].

¹⁵ Stewart Lee, *How I Escaped*, pp. 65-66.

¹⁶ Noble, p. xi.

¹⁷ Noble, p. xi.

language does in spite of them – is important, worth emphasizing, and celebrating. Noble praises Double for giving his readers ‘a chance to look behind the curtain and lift the lid and get an insight into how those moments are created’. Before adding, ‘I am not quite sure why there is a lid behind the curtains, so if you want to know about that I suggest you buy a book about home furnishing’.¹⁸ When their self-celebratory rhetoric becomes unmanageable, or risks sounding ‘pretentious’, stand-up comedians can also resort once again to the simplicity, the straightforwardness, of what they do. This, from Ross Noble: ‘even though stand-up has its roots in theatre poetry and literature at its most primitive, it is just one person with funny bones in front of a group of people being funny’.¹⁹ Perhaps the limit point of this is the statement Lee makes, when explaining his rediscovered enthusiasm for the artform, or else the job: ‘I realised that stand-up was just one man on a stage in a room.’²⁰

Although it can function as a gesture of undercutting, there is something celebratory, too, about a statement like ‘just a man on a stage in a room’. And it is undoubtedly problematic when the stripping away of all pretention leaves us with ‘just a man’ – and, as I will demonstrate, the claim that something or someone is ‘just’ funny can be equally problematic. Might it be possible, then, to develop an account of why a particular word, or substance, or thing, or person, is perceived to be ‘just’ funny, and in so doing, put pressure on the self-evidence of that ‘just’? And what might be at stake in attempting to do so? Might it have to do with the question of what kind of person is being assumed when, in the context of stand-up discourse, the ‘just one person with funny bones’ is praised as ‘a natural’?

3. Figures of literal-mindedness

My feelings of awkwardness at the Stewart Lee gig, and my sense of vague

¹⁸ Noble, p. xi.

¹⁹ Noble, pp. x-xi (punctuation as in original).

²⁰ Lee, *How I Escaped*, p. 39.

anxiety around the way I have deployed Ross Noble's statements to serve my own argument, leads me to consult, once again, Shannon Jackson's discussion of what she calls the 'scholar-versus-artist divide' in performance studies. In a key chapter of *Professing Performance*, Jackson sets out to work out how a particular sort of friction between practitioners and academics is discernable through their seemingly opposed modes of reference.²¹ By means of example, Jackson cites a 'notoriously stalled' conversation between Nick Kaye and Liz LeCompte. The former is known as a scholar of postmodern performance, the latter as the central theatre director with the Wooster Group, the hugely influential New York-based performance company. During the conversation, which was set up as an interview, LeCompte repeatedly refused Kaye's line of questioning by saying things like 'I don't know what that is', 'I don't speak the language', 'I don't have an academic interest', and 'I'm very literal, as you can see'.²²

According to Jackson, within the sphere of performance studies, 'this kind of conversational stall is ubiquitous'.²³ For her, what underlies the tension that crackles in such friction-ridden moments between practitioner and theorist is that old opposition between intellectual and manual labour. This opposition is played out in such scenes of dialogue and can be felt in the participants' recourse to different, and perhaps mutually incompatible, modes of speaking about performance. Jackson offers a simple model for this: it is the literal coming up against the figurative, or rhetorical. Jackson herself admits the scene is more complicated than her model implies, citing the 'unhelpfully ubiquitous opposition between production and research'.²⁴ But the binary oppositions she offers are themselves distractingly suggestive, especially when reified as two persons, LeCompte and Kaye, embodying the two sides of the polemic: practitioner versus theorist, manual versus intellectual, literal versus figurative.

²¹ See 'Practice and Performance: Modernist Paradoxes and Literalist Legacies' in Jackson, pp. 109-145.

²² Nick Kaye, 'Elizabeth LeCompte: Interview,' *The Twentieth Century Performance Reader*, ed. Michael Huxley and Noel Witts (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 228-36 (pp. 229, 230, 234)

²³ Jackson, p. 111.

²⁴ Jackson, p. 112.

When Kaye, in a moment that Jackson reads as 'exasperated', says, 'That kind of focus doesn't offer itself to any kind of question I might ask about meaning or theme, does it?', LeCompte responds, 'No. Again, you can talk to me about what's going on onstage.' At the end of the interview, LeCompte sums up her position thus: when starting work on a new piece, she says, 'I don't have any thematic ideas – I don't even have a theme. I don't have anything except literal objects – some flowers, some images, some television sets, a chair, some costumes I like'.²⁵

For Jackson, this is typical of the way practitioners often take pride in the fact that they operate in a literal and pragmatic mode, whereas scholars such as Kaye (and, Jackson admits, herself) see it as their job to 'go through a variety of theoretical manoeuvres to illustrate that performance is hardly literal at all'.²⁶

In her discussion, Jackson grants Theory the status of a proper noun. She is thinking specifically of the deconstructive moment in theory, a specifically contextualized set of discursive developments, which she describes as a 'mixture of literary, rhetorical, and philosophical studies whose deconstructions would inspire and irk humanities departments for decades to follow'.²⁷ For Jackson, one of the key moments in its emergence is marked by the publication of Derrida's *De la Grammatologie* in 1967. The influence of that volume, and its author's critique of 'regressive metaphysics', means that a recourse to 'literal objects' is untenable, even unhearable, within certain institutional settings. Speaking to and on behalf of scholars, Jackson reflects that 'many of us work with the assumption that no thing, person, or experience could ever have the full irreducibility of pure presence or the self-coincidence of a simple idea'. Jackson then chastens herself and her colleagues for wielding, at times unthinkingly, 'the class privilege of Theory', for being too 'quick to roll our eyes at all the other "handymen" who just don't get it'.²⁸

²⁵ Kaye, 'Elizabeth LeCompte,' p. 234.

²⁶ Jackson, p. 112.

²⁷ Jackson, p. 116.

²⁸ Jackson, p. 120.

The figure of the handyman is one Jackson has plucked from a text by Paul de Man, in whose work she reads a 'critique of literality' that is characteristic of deconstruction's 'revival of rhetoric'.²⁹ In 'The Epistemology of Metaphor', de Man reads John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, taking aim at the earlier philosopher's call for philosophical discourse to free itself from the disruptive effects of figurative language. He cites Locke, who writes, 'if we would speak of things as they are... we must allow that all arts of rhetoric [...] are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong *ideas*, move the passions, mislead the judgement'.³⁰ Such a sentiment, argues de Man, is characteristic of philosophy's age-old suspicion of rhetoric. Whilst historically, rhetorical figures such as metaphor have been considered allowable within poetry and literature, in the 'serious' business of philosophy, figurative language is, as de Man puts it, 'a disruptive scandal'.³¹ However – and this is where de Man begins to have some fun – Locke's argument *against* rhetoric does not manage to free itself of rhetoric. His statements are undercut by the figures within his own text. For example, he describes language as 'a conduit' that, if beset by figural aberrations, may 'corrupt the foundations of knowledge which are in things themselves' and even worse 'break or stop the pipes whereby it is distributed to public use'. In order to decry rhetoric, Locke deploys the language 'not of poetic "pipes and timbrels" but of a plumber's handyman', language that 'raises, by its all too graphic concreteness, questions of propriety'.³²

Alert to the 'class privilege of Theory', Jackson is bothered by de Man's association of this imagined manual laborer with 'all too graphic concreteness'. She reads de Man's invocation of the plumber's handyman as a personification of the 'literalized imagination' that drove Locke's pursuit of "simple ideas". For Jackson, de Man's resort to the anti-rhetoric of John Locke, a seventeenth-century English philosopher, is typical of the 'partial and opportunistic resuscitations [that] structured many of the classic arguments of

²⁹ Jackson, p. 115.

³⁰ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. John W. Yolton, 2 vols. (London and New York: Dutton, 1961), Bk 3, chap. 10, pp. 105-6, emphasis original.

³¹ de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, p.36.

³² de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, p.36.

deconstruction'.³³ She thinks what de Man is up to here is analogous to what Derrida was doing in *De la Grammatologie*:

As Derrida's critique of presence argued that the unmediated oral does not precede textuality but is an ever-deferred epiphenomenon of textuality itself, so de Man's critique of literality argued that simple and irreducible knowledge does not precede figuration but is an imagined state produced by figuration itself.³⁴

The Derridean and deManian deconstructive projects are aligned in Jackson's model, seeming to operate via a similar thought structure, with the shared aim of making legible the 'disavowed complexity in the space of the "simple"' and the 'work of figuration in the presumably literal'.³⁵ However, it may be that Jackson is too quick to sum up de Man's deconstruction as an adjunct to, a continuation of Derrida's. Although she acknowledges its simplification, Jackson's polemical model, which pits Kaye against LeCompte, theory against practice, rhetoric against literality, implies that de Man was arguing for the *primacy*, and thus the superiority of rhetoric as a mode of thought and expression. Whereas, arguably, in this text de Man is observing the *unavoidability* of rhetoric. Moreover, an important aim of de Man's 'rhetorical deconstruction' was that of debunking the mystifications of metaphor, a specific kind of rhetorical figure that de Man critiqued as 'totalizing'. De Man set out to demystify rhetorical totalisations, but not via recourse to the supposed 'opposite' of rhetoric (by appealing to a kind of plain speaking). Rather, he tried to show how, with a little bit of prodding, texts *deconstruct themselves*. He demonstrated how the various rhetorical dimensions of a text are quite capable of undermining one another. One of his key methods is to show how reading a text closely can throw up odd, distracting figures, such as the plumber's handyman. Figures that, once animated, might well refuse to leave the stage.

Although Jackson seeks to summarise de Man's argument, critique his position, and then move on, de Man's own rhetorical strategies leave a residue in her

³³ Jackson, p. 119.

³⁴ Jackson, p. 120.

³⁵ Jackson, p. 132.

own text in shape of a specific figure: the figure of the handyman, which, having emerged out of Man's reading of Locke, continues to be animated within Jackson's account of the performance art scene of the 1960s and 1970s. For example, she reproaches sculptor Tony Smith for appropriating 'the symbols of the handyman's literal without knowing how to make them work',³⁶ alluding to LeCompte's self-declared literalism, she writes that 'Each theatrical minimalist recalls the practices of the handyman, telling us to beware of the simplicity of their "constructions"'.³⁷ What Jackson might usefully have acknowledged in her discussion is that, by taking the handyman figure into her own text, she is demonstrating something that de Man also set out to demonstrate: the way in which what might be considered literary effects, in other words, figures – in this case, personification – also move through theoretical or critical texts, and have the power to disrupt them.

De Man's approach to the difference between the literal and the figurative is by no means straightforward, and the way he approaches (and debunks) the apparent binary is bound up with his singular understanding of the term 'rhetoric'. Rhetoric for him is the disruptive force that emerges when language performs. His simplest and perhaps best-known demonstration of this disruptive force concerns the phenomenon of the so-called rhetorical question, which, as he points out, may be the commonest instance of the word 'rhetorical' in daily practice. But, as his discussion demonstrates, the rhetorical question is by no means a simple case. It is, rather, something of a 'semiological enigma'. For, when a question that is, weirdly, *not* a question is invoked, in speech or writing, 'It is not so that there are simply two meanings, one literal and the other figural, and that we have to decide which is the right one in a particular situation'.³⁸

The grammatical model of the question becomes rhetorical not when we have, on the one hand, a literal meaning and on the other hand a figural meaning, but when it is *impossible to decide* by grammatical or other linguistic means which of the two meanings (that can be entirely

³⁶ Jackson, p. 132.

³⁷ Jackson, p. 141.

³⁸ Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, p. 10.

incompatible) prevails.³⁹

Later in her discussion, Jackson does acknowledge that de Man 'framed the function of deconstructive reading around the *uncertain* relationship between the literal and the figural',⁴⁰ and she cites the example – the famous example – by which de Man illustrates the problem of the rhetorical question, which is drawn from the US television sit-com *All in the Family*:

Asked by his wife whether he wants to have his bowling shoes laced over or laced under, Archie Bunker answers with a question: 'What's the difference?' Being a reader of sublime simplicity, his wife replies by patiently explaining the difference between lacing over and lacing under, whatever this may be, but it provokes only ire. 'What's the difference?' did not ask for difference but means instead 'I don't give a damn what the difference is.' The same grammatical pattern engenders two meanings that are mutually exclusive: the literal meaning asks for the concept (difference) whose existence is denied by the figurative meaning. [...] Archie Bunker [...] muddles along in a world where literal and figural meanings get in each other's way, though not without discomforts.⁴¹

Jackson reads these two demonstrations of de Man's deconstructive method alongside one another. For her, the mocking disquisition on Locke, and the reading of the Bunker scene, are both examples of a high-minded dismissal of perceived literalism that is typical of deconstructive theory. Worse, the *figures* de Man invokes as personifications of this simplistic mindset – the plumber's handyman, the put-upon housewife – together 'testify to a classed rhetoric as well as another kind of gendered rhetoric that remained unexamined in deconstruction.'⁴²

Someone who has made comedy a lifelong profession may well read this example, and Jackson's reading of it, differently. For this is an example taken from a comedy, a sit-com, being deployed by a Theorist to demonstrate

³⁹ de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, p. 10.

⁴⁰ Jackson, p. 138.

⁴¹ de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, pp. 9-10.

⁴² Jackson, p. 139.

something theoretical about language. And that in turn is being appropriated, by Jackson, as a comparison for the conversational stalls that occur when scholars and practitioners of performance meet, and to chasten the former for being, possibly, too quick to roll their eyes at the perceived simplicity of the latter. In that same process, Jackson is calling out de Man for the unchecked prejudices that speak through his own rhetoric, his own choice of example. The various appropriations and re-appropriations at work here gives rise to a set of problems that has taken me some time to untangle. Within the context of my own enquiry, this process has proven productive in several ways. First, in prompting me to reflect upon the way that theoreticians and practitioners of art and performance often enthusiastically, and self-ironically, appropriate figures from the world of comedy. In light of this, objections might be raised as to occlusion of the professional comedian, or comic actor or writer – those employed in the field of popular entertainment – from the discursive scenes of theory and performance. Second, it makes me think about the way certain ‘types’ are represented within comedy, a field of practice that has its own mode of operation, a fact that is acknowledged neither in de Man’s nor in Jackson’s discussion. This is problematic, perhaps especially in Jackson’s discussion of class privilege, because comedy has its *own* long-established fascination with class, and its depictions are historically specific. *All in the Family* is a US remake of a well-known British sitcom, *‘Til Death Do Us Part*, both aired during the 1970s, both of which revolved around a caricature of a certain kind of white working class sexism and bigotry. Therefore, the characters involved in the conversation, and the things they are talking about – bowling shoes – are bound up in a certain representation of working class persons and lifestyles. And third, it makes me wonder about how I might embark upon a task of producing scholarly work on stand-up comedy in early twenty-first century Britain, and do so from the embodied position of a woman. How might I exercise responsibility with regard to the figures within my *own* text?

It is here that I turn to the work of Barbara Johnson, a contemporary and colleague of de Man who called attention to the ‘patterns of female effacement’ within his work, and more pervasively within the critical texts produced by the so-called ‘Yale School’ of which he was the leading member. De Man’s

dismissive treatment of Edith Bunker serves as her closing example. In his explication of the Bunkers' marital exchange de Man does not name Edith Bunker, nor does he quote directly her response to her husband's utterance, merely sufficing to make reference to her explanation of 'the difference between lacing over and lacing under, *whatever this may be...*'.⁴³ Johnson reads this as an instance of the 'repeated dramatization of women as simulacrum, erasure, or silence',⁴⁴ a trope recurring within the Western aesthetic tradition, and repeated apparently unselfconsciously within many of the deconstructionist treatises on literature and rhetoric published in the 1970s and 1980s. Amongst her examples, she includes de Man's tongue-in-cheek response to Locke's comparison of rhetorical language to 'the fair sex'. When Locke writes that, like women, 'eloquence.. has too prevailing beauties in it to suffer itself ever to be spoken against. And it is in vain to find fault in those arts of deceiving wherein men find pleasure to be deceived', de Man satirizes him via an extended metaphor imagining the philosophical tradition as a 'gentlemen's club', into which a woman would only be tolerated as a picture framed on the wall, 'preferably naked', before adding, wryly, 'things only get serious when the plumber must be called in'.⁴⁵ As Johnson notes, de Man might be critiquing Locke's anti-rhetorical prejudice, but does so by perpetuating his sexist rhetoric.

Johnson includes her own earlier work in her critique, commenting 'it is not enough to be a woman writing in order to resist the pseudogenderlessness of language'. She concludes by encapsulating the difficult task of feminist deconstruction as 'undertaking the effort of reinflection or translation required [...] to learn to listen with retrained ears to Edith Bunker's patient elaboration of the question, "What *is* the difference?"'.⁴⁶ Johnson thus lays down a challenge, one that I have attempted to respond to in the second half of this chapter. First, before Edith can return, I must turn my attention to a further encounter between men: both deconstructionists, one a comedian, the other a theorist.

⁴³ de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, p. 9, emphasis added.

⁴⁴ Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 40.

⁴⁵ de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, p. 38.

⁴⁶ Johnson, *A World of Difference*, p. 41.

4. Deconstruction and wee

The vignette Jackson sketches belongs to a particular discursive context – a time, a place, an artistic scene – that at first might appear very different from the one in which I find myself, as the weirded-out scholar at a stand-up comedy gig in twenty-first century Britain. But Jackson’s discussion prompts me to reflect anew upon what kinds of new professional tensions and alignments are emerging as stand-up makes its way into the academy. The example of stand-up comedy makes it necessary to look again at the terms of the scholar-versus-artist divide. On the one hand, Oliver Double appears to bridge that gap. But, on the other hand, the working conditions of stand-up – the competitive atmosphere of the circuit, the long runs at Edinburgh, the multi-date national tours – exacerbate the sense of a division between those who sit within the sequestered halls of academia and think about performance and those who actually get out there and do it. Stewart Lee, for example, frames the value and the challenge of his profession like this:

Out in the provinces, beyond the citadel of theatre, the stand-up comedians that pitch up to council-funded venues around the country are actually the closest thing punters there get to experiencing real art.⁴⁷

He is irritated by the oft-repeated favourable summation of a comedian’s work as ‘the closest stand-up comedy gets to art’, complaining that the implication is, as far as the arbiters of high culture are concerned, ‘however good stand-up gets, it can never really be art’ (157). Indeed, ‘In the world of the arts, a comedian, despite all the skills they pick up in the harshest environments, is never more than a “trade”.’ However, Lee writes that, by the time he had finished work on his 2005 show *90’s Comedian*, he was more than happy to embrace the idea of himself as a sort of tradesman: ‘Leave me here, all you legitimate artists,’ he writes, ‘with my can of lager and my notebook’ (158). It is worth remembering at this point that, since the early days of cinema, the tasks associated with manual labour have been appropriated for comic purposes:

⁴⁷ Lee, *How I Escaped*, p. 157. Subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically within the text.

think of Buster Keaton sawing through a plank, or the Lumière Brothers' early sketch about a thwarted gardener, or Laurel and Hardy as jobbing handymen. The figure of the tradesman or manual laborer, it seems, has interdisciplinary appeal, appropriated by comedians and artists alike (and, in the case of Lee, by a comedian asserting his status as a non-artist). In 2007, art journal *Frieze* released an issue with the theme: 'The Slapstick Method: Art and Comic Timing'. Inside, Brian Dillon offered nine 'Theses on Slapstick', referring to Laurel and Hardy as 'theorists of slowness'.⁴⁸ It is possible, then, for slapstick's inept handyman to be elevated to the status of a theorist (a position that, for Jackson, enjoys a certain 'class privilege'). Via a series of displacements, it seems we are getting further and further from the actuality of labour, from the manual competence of a plumber or car mechanic.

Back in 1994, Stewart Lee described himself as 'the third most theoretically rigorous comedian in Britain',⁴⁹ which sounds funny. Is this because comedians are not customarily thought of as theorists, or because theorists are not usually ranked and numbered according to their 'rigorousness'? In the years since 1994, Lee has gained acclaim for his work, and the critical consensus would seem to suggest that Lee's stand-up is unusual in a way that could indeed be termed 'theoretically rigorous'. There seems to be doubt as to whether what he is doing can be called 'comedy' at all: he is said to practice 'anti-comedy' or 'meta-comedy',⁵⁰ or – and this is the most interesting in the current context – to be 'deconstructing' comedy.⁵¹ What is it about Lee's work that elicits such descriptions? Perhaps the way he tells simplistic or idiotic jokes, and then berates his audience for laughing at them, or the way he interrupts his own jokes to explain why they are not working. Such explanations are often lengthy, and lot of people find them irritating. Others find them funny, which might lead us to the conclusion that, if what Stewart Lee does *is* deconstruction, then it's

⁴⁸ Dillon, p. 260.

⁴⁹ Ben Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty: The Golden Age of British Comedy, from Vic Reeves to The Office* (London: Fourth Estate, 2004) p.59.

⁵⁰ Double, p. 174.

⁵¹ Lee himself deflects this, when he writes, 'Critics often talk about me "deconstructing" comedy. I don't think it's as complicated as that. I just think it's funny to take a joke and show the working out in the margins' (Lee, *How I Escaped*, p. 64).

not something he does only *to* comedy; he also does it *as* comedy. In this case, the question we should be asking is not whether or not deconstruction – as a theory, or method – is appropriate to the reading of stand-up comedy, but instead, how it is that deconstruction can itself, in certain circumstances, become funny.

So, on September the 11th, 2001...

This is the first line of *Stand-Up Comedian*. Abrupt, after the forced jollity of Lee's entrance, with its upbeat music, audience applause, that little comedian-style jog onto the stage, up to the mic. In a footnote, Lee concedes that, to his reader, cutting the party atmosphere dead with a reference to the tragedy of the World Trade Center 'probably seems in poor taste'. But, he notes 'three years after 9/11, when I first began performing this show, the event was still inescapable on a daily basis, percolating even apparently unrelated media' (44).

Although Lee himself does not acknowledge this directly, it is arguably no coincidence that Lee begins *Stand-Up Comedian* with a reference to this date, the events of which 'had changed everything' (44). This was Lee's first show after a four-year break from stand-up, the first of the three transcribed in Lee's self-canonizing memoir *How I Escaped My Certain Fate*. The blunt, literalist title of the show, which was listed in the 2004 Edinburgh Fringe programme as *Stewart Lee – Stand-Up Comedian*, further reinforces the sense of this as a deliberate moment of re-reefinition on Lee's part.

As the show goes on, Lee uses the ever-present backdrop of 9/11 to drive discussions around public rhetoric and what he names as 'all the myths, lies and macho nostalgia that go towards forging any national identity' (73), but also around comedy itself as a form of public rhetoric. He seems, at various moments, to be addressing the particular anxieties that might attend the enjoyment of, even the reveling in, trivialities – silly jokes, idle talk, in the aftermath of a world-changing event such as the attacks on the World Trade Centre. At the top of the show, with the reference to 9/11, the atmosphere in the room is abruptly altered. The still-recent tragedy is a sensitive topic, not the kind

of subject matter that lends itself easily to jokes. After a pause, Lee continues with his anecdote. 'On September the 11th, 2001, I was on holiday,' he explains,

And I was actually in the city of Granada in southern Spain, right. It's an interesting place. Granada was kind of the last point of Muslim occupation in medieval Europe. It's still a very mixed city – lots of mosques, lots of churches too, lots of Arab Spaniards and white European Spaniards, all getting on fine. (45)

Hearing news of the attacks, Lee enters a local bar to watch the television coverage. It is when George W. Bush comes onscreen, proffering warlike rhetoric, that the atmosphere changes. 'There was suddenly a horrible tension between the Arab Spaniards and the white European Spaniards in this previously happy bar.' After a while, Lee can't take it, so, he says, 'I went into the Gents to do a wee, and, er...'. He interrupts his anecdote at this point, acknowledging, 'A couple of people over there sniggered at the word 'wee'. That's fine, I know this is a tense subject to open with and I'm, I'm happy that the word 'wee' has helped diffuse the atmosphere a bit.' And so he continues, 'I was standing there, doing a wee... out of my cock... and it was yellow... and smelt of wee' (47).

This little interruption, a minor derailing of the topic at hand in order to revel in that which appears to have disrupted his efforts to tell a 'serious' story – the audience getting distracted by the mention of the word "wee" – might, at a push, be thought of as a deconstructive moment. Lee is putting his audience in the position of deconstructive readers who, according to Johnson's definition, are the kind of readers who pay attention to 'what readers have traditionally been trained to disregard, overcome, explain away or edit out'.⁵² Johnson is thinking of 'contradictions, obscurities, ambiguities, incoherences, discontinuities, ellipses, interruptions, repetitions, and plays of the signifier'⁵³ – all the disruptive textual elements that deconstructionists might be accused of taking a little bit too much pleasure in. For the critics of de Man, and of deconstructive theory more

⁵² Barbara Johnson, 'Rigorous Undecidability', *Critical Inquiry*, 11. 2 (1984), pp. 278-285, p. 278.

⁵³ Johnson, 'Rigorous Undecidability', p. 278.

generally, the constant focus on the obstacles to meaning were not only irritating, but somehow irresponsible, seeming to amount to what Cathy Caruth defines as a claim that 'language cannot refer adequately to the world and indeed may not refer to anything at all, leaving language, literature and even consciousness in general, cut off from historical reality'.⁵⁴ Terry Eagleton appears to suggest as much when, he writes that deconstruction views 'famines, revolutions, soccer matches and sherry trifles as yet more undecidable text'.⁵⁵ Offering her take, Caruth argues that de Man's work did not *deny* that language could refer, but rather sought to problematize reference, and in so doing critique a certain Western conception of linguistic signification, one that promoted the idea that there was something natural, necessary and inherent in the link between words and things. De Man demonstrated how this myth, which promoted as *necessary* signs and symbols whose link with their meaning was, in fact, arbitrary, is woven through Western literature and thought, constituting a powerful and pervasive 'aesthetic ideology'. This can be detected, for example, in the strand of literary theory that stems from romanticism, which espouses a model of linguistic reference based upon natural law. According to this way of thinking, W.B. Yeats' celebrated line 'how can we know the dancer from the dance?' offers a 'vision of aesthetic wholeness'. And, by extension, as the critic Wendy Steiner puts it,

a work of literature was a whole, a system, a body in which meaning and form were one, in which every idea in the text was expressed through its structure, and the ideas 'meant' the structure as well.⁵⁶

This, perhaps, seems far away from Lee standing onstage in 2004 and talking about weeing out of his cock. But there's something going on here – not only in what Lee does onstage, but also in how Lee *explains* what he does onstage – that sets in motion a distinctly deManian set of questions. In a footnote to the 'weeing out of my cock' line, Lee reflects, 'I suppose what I was doing here was

⁵⁴ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1996), p. 74.

⁵⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 146.

⁵⁶ Wendy Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in an Age of Fundamentalism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 200.

trying to exploit the tension of discussing something puerile in the midst of something terribly serious'. And then, undercutting his reflective tone, adds, 'Also, wee is funny' (47). This move is reminiscent of the one that Seinfeld pulls when, in the *New York Times* video, he is pressed as to why he considers the line 'we were like chimps in the dirt playing with sticks' to be successful. He responds by giving one of those blank-faced smiles he's so practiced at, flashing his white teeth at the camera and saying, as if it were the simplest thing in the world: 'chimps are funny!' We could read the subtext of this kind of statement as saying 'of course', 'everybody knows', or 'it's the most natural thing in the world'. The fact that, in Seinfeld's case, what is under discussion is an image that represents something like a 'state of nature' only compounds the impression that there is some recourse to 'natural law' in this shoulder-shrugging statement of self-evidence. But, as the twinkle in his eye suggests, it is a performance too, a performance comparable to that of Liz LeCompte perhaps, a way of deflecting interpretive efforts by saying 'I'm very literal, as you can see'.

Admittedly, Lee's footnote about wee is not quite as blunt as my selective quotation implied. In full, the line reads, 'Also, wee is funny, especially if it is being weed out of a cock. Into a toilet. On 9/11' (47). Although this is not necessarily a fuller explanation, by further demonstrating the joke, Lee does seem to be going further than a Seinfeld/LeCompte 'all I have are some literal objects' moment. Historical context is at stake here, it seems. And, at this moment, we might recall Eagleton's wry critique of what he evidently takes to be the 'trivialising' effects of deconstruction, the way it views 'famines, revolutions, soccer matches and sherry trifles as yet more undecidable text'. In light of Lee's 'wee' moment, it might be observed that Eagleton's critique is expressed in a way that performs a comic incongruity, juxtaposing 'serious' historical events something, if not puerile, then certainly pretty trivial (it's perhaps too much to point out it is literally 'a trifle'). For now, I will do little more than nod to the gender specificity of Lee's example, to the fact that he is talking not about sherry trifles, but about weeing out of a *cock*, in a *Gents*, near the start of a show in which he explicitly seeks to debunk 'macho myths of nationhood'.

Eagleton's statement performs the same kind of humour as Lee's footnote, although the sequence is reversed: whereas Eagleton's relies on a 'downwards' movement from the important to the absolutely trivial, Lee's moves 'up', or perhaps 'out' from the puerile to the terribly serious, into what, citing de Man, we might think of as 'the non-verbal "outside"'.⁵⁷ And metaphors of inside and outside are often invoked when people want to talk about what a text does, or doesn't do, or should do. For example on the back cover of Lee's book it says: 'See how jokes work, their inner mechanisms revealed, before your astonished face!'. Noble also refers to the 'inner workings of comedy', a metaphor that invites us to think of the comedian as a sort of skilled mechanic.

Once upon a time, in literary studies, the prevailing understanding of the relation between form and content, was that form was on the outside, the meaning on the inside. As with the 'well wrought urn' – the critic's job is to be the one able to release the secrets held within the pot, whilst celebrating its lovely shape. But, as de Man notes,

The development of intrinsic, formalist criticism in the twentieth century has changed this model; form is now a solipsistic category of self-reflection, and the referential meaning is said to be extrinsic. The polarities of inside and outside have been reversed [...] internal meaning has become outside reference.⁵⁸

De Man points out that, because its code is often so conspicuous, and complex, literature necessarily breeds its own formalism. However, 'no literary formalism, no matter how accurate and enriching in its analytic powers, is ever allowed to come into being without seeming reductive'. And this means that the project of the literary critic, the close reader, for whom form can quite easily become an 'all absorbing and tyrannical muse', generates a sense of ethical anxiety: all this inwardness is thought to be unhealthy. This is why, as de Man notes, formalism is often described no longer in terms of the well-wrought urn, but via 'an imagery of imprisonment and claustrophobia: the "prison house of language"'.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, p. 3.

⁵⁸ de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, p. 4.

And thus the impulse to move 'beyond formalism' in order to 'devote ourselves to foreign affairs, the external politics of literature', and make the effects of our work felt in 'the non-verbal "outside" to which language refers'. This can lead to attempts 'to reconcile the internal, formal, private structures of literary language with their external, referential, and public events', which, although driven by a "highly respectable moral imperative', tends to lead to the creation of 'false models and metaphors'.⁵⁹ It is when such false metaphors become, according to de Man's term, 'totalising', that the powers of abstraction – the aesthetic ideology – take hold.

5. A joke 'about' a tea cosy

And then there is a joke about a tea cosy. Twenty minutes into *Stand-Up Comedian*, after his account of weeing on 9/11, Lee tells a joke about a tea cosy. Or, to be more accurate, a tea cosy features in a joke about the American national character. 'They're not a naturally curious people,' he says

If you were to lock an American for sixty years in an empty underground bunker which contained nothing but a woolly tea cosy, the American would not even be tempted to see if the tea cosy would make a serviceable hat.⁶⁰

At the scene of Lee's (recorded) performance, this joke gets a laugh. That is the first thing to note: it is, on these terms, a successful joke. There are certain elements of its set-up that I *could* cite here – contextualising factors, both internal and external to the text of *Stand-Up Comedian*, which might be considered relevant to a *reading* of this joke. I might, for example, remind you that Lee created and performed this stand-up show in 2004, three years after the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks on New York, the fallout of which led to the still-recent US led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. I might also explain that the tea cosy joke marks the rhythmic climax of a sequence that begins with Lee's assertion that 'America is currently the most hated country in the world', and

⁵⁹ de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, pp. 3-4.

⁶⁰ All further quotations from this routine are drawn from Lee, pp. 61-68.

continues, by a slightly unexpected turn, with the repeated invocation ‘you mustn’t hate Americans’, because ‘they live in a state of ignorant, prelapsarian bliss. They don’t know what’s going on.’

However, you might well argue that none of this is, strictly speaking, relevant to the joke, at least in formalist terms, by which I mean, whether or not you know any of it, the joke still *works*: all you need to know in order to ‘get’ this joke is that there is such a thing as a tea cosy, and that there is a certain degree of resemblance between a tea cosy and a hat. Arguably, the joke relies less on its caricature of a national character, than on the idea (introduced via negation) of a person putting a tea cosy on their head, as though it were a hat. And, with proper joke timing, this image is held back until the very last syllable of the joke: ‘hat’. It’s a blunt, flat sort of word. Has an impact, rhymes with ‘splat’. And indeed, the end of a joke, the punchline, (i.e. what *makes* it a joke) is often talked about in these terms, using words that suggest a sudden physical impact – a slap, or snap, or thwack, a jolt, or a fall, or a pie in the face.

Recalling Jerry Seinfeld’s account of crafting a joke, the way he talks about counting syllables, shaving letters of words in order to make sure that the thwack of the punchline comes not a split-second too early or late, we could take a closer look at what Seinfeld would call the ‘connective tissue’ of this joke, the way it not only delays the punchline, but it gets us in exactly the right place to feel its full force. That impactful final word, ‘hat’, comes right at the end of a rather lofty sentence, one that is grammatically and syntactically complex. In the very first word, ‘If...’, we hear that the tense is conditional, the mood subjunctive:

If you were

This is speculative, it is about what *might* or *could* take place, hypothetically. A string of prepositions and conjunctions next –

to lock an American... *for* sixty years.... *in* an empty underground bunker... *which* contained nothing...

but a woolly tea cosy

the surprise of the tea cosy is followed by a negative conditional –

the American *would not even be tempted to...*

The repetition, the wordiness, the careful delivery – all of this also serves to generate anticipation. *What* would the American not even be tempted to do...?

... see *if* the tea cosy *would* make a...

And then, before the final reveal, the word ‘hat’, there is a further delay, in the shape of that peculiarly formal, polysyllabic word –

...serviceable...

– a word that is doing not only rhythmic work (delaying the final impactful syllable of the joke), but lending a certain incongruous formality to Lee’s mode of speaking. And it ends in a satisfying moment of closure – of ‘fit’. The tea cosy *would* make a serviceable hat. Like Seinfeld says, ‘You know in my world, the wronger something feels, the righter it is.’ This formalist reading reaches a nice moment of resolution: the tea cosy fits *because it shouldn’t* and it feels so silly, and so right.

But we are not going to leave it here, just as Stewart Lee does not leave it here. Thus far I have cited only the first part of what is, in practice, onstage, an extended sequence in which the words ‘tea cosy’ are repeatedly sounded.

So, it begins with the apparently self-contained, hermetically sealed, joke,

If you were to lock an American for sixty years in an empty underground bunker which contained nothing but a woolly tea cosy, the American would not even be tempted to see if the tea cosy would make a serviceable hat.

But then,

They're far more likely to arrest the tea cosy, intern it illegally in Guantanamo Bay, and then repeatedly anally rape it until such a time that it admits that it was actually a member of an al-Qaeda training cell. Even though at the time of the alleged offence the tea cosy was actually working as a shop assistant in a branch of Currys in Wolverhampton.

It might be observed that, in a formal sense, this adheres to classic joke form: another wordy build-up, another punchline, another incongruous image held off until the very end of a long sentence. This time, the lofty formality of the sentence is amplified by that quasi-judicial register ('until such a time', 'the alleged offence'), that then 'falls' into the incongruous particularity of the punchline: a 'branch of Currys in Wolverhampton'. But in spite of its formal credentials, this is not a joke to equal the previous one. No, there's something about this 'joke' that doesn't feel right. Stewart Lee acknowledges this.

According to the transcript, he says,

Some laughs there, other people are a bit confused. "What's he talking about?"

Right? OK, well, again, that's a kind of bit of satire of the fact that some of the British citizens held in Guantanamo Bay were tortured into saying that they'd been in al-Qaeda camps, even though at the time they were supposed to be there, they were actually working as shop assistants in a branch of Currys in Wolverhampton.

The explanation Lee offers, testily, onstage is of a different order to the 'chimps are funny!' kind of explanation. It is a direct reference to what, following de Man, we might name as 'external, referential, and public events', matters of historical record.⁶¹ But Lee's onstage explanation, although it appears to point clearly to the 'outside world', is not what you'd call 'straight'. Because Lee is playing a

⁶¹ Lee is referring to the 'Tipton Three', Shafiq Rasul, Asef Iqbal and Ruhel Ahmed, who were held for more than two years at Guantanamo Bay. In mid-2004, the trio released a report alleging that, as a result of the systematic abuse they suffered, they wrongly confessed to appearing in a video with Osama Bin Laden. Rasul was working in Currys at the time the video was filmed. See Ruhel Ahmed, Asif Iqbal and Shafiq Rasul, 'Detention in Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay', online <<http://www.globalresearch.ca/articles/RAS408A.html>> [accessed 16 September 2016].

game here – acting as if the audience’s muted response was due to their lack of comprehension, a failure to get the reference, rather than admit that it was *actually, probably* due to the slightly tenuous and slightly logic-defying segue he has just made. Because, tonally, the shift was too abrupt. Lee swerved too quickly out of the nice, satisfying line about being locked in a bunker with a tea cosy and not trying it on as a hat, a well-formed joke, with fuzzy charm, that works ‘in isolation’, into something that seems to fancy itself as biting topical satire. It feels too violent, and that reference to sexual violence (which is an exaggerated version of the abuse alleged to have taken place at Guantanamo), compounds the impropriety of his figural scheme which, effectively, *drags* the tea cosy out of the hypothetical bunker and into the post-9/11 world, the world of Currys in Wolverhampton, in order to make an entirely predictable swipe at the aggressiveness of US foreign policy.

But then, Lee makes an unexpected move:

Other people I sense are going, “Yeah, we know about that. That’s not what’s confusing us. What’s confusing us here in Glasgow is the idea of a tea cosy working as a shop assistant in a branch of Currys. How could that possibly work?”

What has he done here? He has directly acknowledged the audience’s response, blamed the joke’s failure on their miscomprehension. And what has emerged from this? A figure, a strange and distracting one. Much stranger, and much more distracting, than the image of a tea-cosy-as-hat. And, in a particular way, this figure is more powerfully distracting than the historical events Lee has just explained.

Lee is the one articulating this miscomprehension, by saying ‘what’s confusing us..’ speaking in a voice he ascribes to his audience, or at least a part of his audience. That word, ‘comprehension’, with its memories of school reading exercises, usefully highlights not only the linguistic, but the readerly, nature of this problem. And miscomprehension, rather than incomprehension, is the word for this. As with the Austinian ‘misfire’, this is not a simple absence of effect;

something else is done. It's not that by not 'getting the joke' the audience gets *nothing* at all. It is, rather, that they get something (some Thing) aberrant: the tea cosy shop assistant, the idea of it.

There is also a displacement of agency here. Lee has (with feigned unwittingness) allowed the aberrant figure of a tea-cosy-as-shop-assistant to be invoked, as though it were an accident, the result of a miscommunication, rather than a figure created by Stewart Lee. And, what follows is several minutes during which the onward flow of Lee's narrative, his show, gets stalled on this question of the tea cosy. A brief vignette illustrating the question of how a tea cosy might 'work' as a shop assistant is offered, a discussion as to what kinds of other items might be listed as working alongside the tea cosy is staged, and the question of how Lee might come up with a satisfactory end to the tea cosy routine is both discussed and deflected by Lee's admission that the joke, in the first place, was plagiarized. In one sense, then, Lee uses the aberration of the tea cosy to stage a demonstration and a discussion of his own 'problems at work'. But it is not Lee's work, the work of a professional comedian, that will interest me in the pages that follow. My interest lies, principally, in the question of the figure itself. A 'figure' can mean a picture or illustration offered for the purposes of example. Or it can mean a body, a human body. The figural aberration of the tea cosy has an uncertain status between human and thing. And therefore, I am going to approach the tea cosy as an illustrative example of the problem of the figure: the question of the human-like-thing, and the thing-like-human.

In the first part of the joke, the words 'tea cosy' refer to the thing of that name. It is what might be called a 'literal object'. Whether or not we imagine the tea cosy as a referent 'outside' or 'inside' the joke, it is definitely a knitted covering for a tea pot that we are supposed to think of when we hear those words. But, the second part of the joke is different. As soon as Lee says 'arrest the tea cosy', we are to understand that Lee does not literally mean 'knitted covering for tea pot', but is using the words rhetorically, as a stand-in. 'Tea cosy' now implies, indirectly, 'person' – and the question of the particularity of the person (i.e. a man, a man who has been singled out because of his religious and ethnic

identity) is one that we will not address directly, not yet, although we shall keep it close by.

What is funny about the final rhetorical move of this section, the one in which Lee attributes miscomprehension of the *rhetorical* meaning of 'tea cosy', is the way it draws attention to the sheer arbitrariness of the figure, 'a tea cosy working as a shop assistant in a branch of Curry's in Wolverhampton'. There is nothing that feels 'natural' or 'organic' or 'necessary' about this. It's not the dancer and the dance; there are no seductive similarities, no magical reconciliation between sign and referent. A tea cosy bears no resemblance to a human being, and it is by a series of substitutions that it has ended up as a shop assistant in a specific branch of an electrical superstore. De Man would call these substitutions 'metonymic'. Unlike metaphor or symbol, a metonymic substitution carries with it no illusion of necessity linkage. Unlike metaphor, which substitutes one property for another on the basis of resemblance, and thus implies a necessary and organic link, metonymy 'replaces the name of one thing with another closely associated with it' and is marked by contingency.⁶² After all, two things can become 'closely associated' by habit, or coincidence, or simply by dint of having ended up next to one another.

De Man seems to have person-thing confusions specifically in mind when, during the course of his explication of the difference between metaphor and metonymy, he comments:

An element of truth is involved in taking Achilles for a lion
but none in taking Mr. Ford for a motor car.⁶³

What he is trying to get across with this comparison is that metaphor has an 'inference of identity',⁶⁴ i.e. Achilles might be compared to a lion in order to communicate his lion-like qualities of strength and fierceness, whereas metonym is a 'purely relational' form of 'contact', i.e. you call your car 'a Ford'

⁶² Chris Baldick, 'Metonymy' in *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 154.

⁶³ de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, p. 14.

⁶⁴ de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, p. 14

not because there is any resemblance between the man who was named Henry Ford and the car itself, but because the vehicle was manufactured by a motor company named after the industrialist who founded it. But the association between tea cosy and shop assistant is not like that between Henry Ford and the motorcar, an association that carries with it the legal recognition of not only one man's ownership of a corporation, but also the legally enshrined rights of that corporation, and its management, to own property in the name 'Ford'. The association between the tea cosy and the shop assistant is weak (as are the figures 'tea cosy' and 'shop assistant' when compared with Mr. Ford or Achilles), established only within the space of this routine, this performance, in the space of an imagined exchange with an audience-figure. Tea cosy has not even a circumstantial relation with shop assistant, it is merely a word carried over from a previous figure and has no necessary link with its meaning. The only relationship between the words 'tea cosy' and a shop assistant is that which the joke itself has set up, rather tenuously.

This relation could be described as one of 'metalepsis', defined by Harold Bloom as the process whereby 'a word is substituted metonymically for a word in a previous trope', which means it can be described 'maddeningly but accurately, a metonymy of a metonymy.'⁶⁵ An example of metalepsis might be useful at this point: suppose, intending to rise early, I say 'I have to catch the worm tomorrow'. In this instance, the idea of catching the worm has, of course, been borrowed from the common saying 'the early bird catches the worm'. I am saying I want to be like the bird, and yet, by omitting mention of the bird, I might to the literal-minded (or pedantic) listener, appear to be stating some inexplicable intention to get hold of a worm. Sixteenth-century literary critic George Puttenham wrote evocatively of 'the hearer's conceit strangely entangled by the figure *metalepsis*,' naming the figure, 'the Far-fetched. As when we had rather fetch a word a great way off than use one nearer to hand to express the manner as well and plainer'. He adds that, 'it seemeth the deviser of this figure had a desire to please women rather than men, for we use to say

⁶⁵ Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) p.75.

by manner of proverb, things far fetched and dear bought are good for ladies'.⁶⁶ Of all the ways figurative language can make a mess of straight talking, metalepsis does not appear to be considered one of the more sinister or threatening. Rather, it is called 'strange', dismissed as a feminized frivolity.

But something doesn't feel quite right. Because what has been occluded by the 'far fetching' of Lee's tea cosy (out of the imaginary bunker, into the electrical superstore) is a reference to a real person, a real historical event, a real act of oppression. Someone has been unlawfully incarcerated and subjected to human rights abuses and Lee is making a joke out of it. Is my method of reading, fixating on this figure compounding the problem? After all, I identify the joke with the tea cosy. I call it 'a joke *about* a tea cosy' and this, in some sense, is my own joke. I spent a year writing about a tea cosy. Knowledge about tea cosies is, it might be argued, a particularized and fairly trivial kind of knowledge, and the joke functions in willful, careless ignorance of events in the real world, of history.

6. Literalness and serviceability

This seems like as good a moment as any to ask what exactly the word 'literal' means. It could be said that, in simple terms, speaking literally is equated with 'straight talking'. Literal language is straightforwardly referential, like 'calling a spade a spade', it points directly at things in the world, and thus offers a direct route *out* of the linguistic (or the literary, or rhetorical) and into the concrete, the actual. However much we might enjoy a bit of 'wordplay', literal talking is what we resort to when we need to be pragmatic, to get things done; we need literal language to go about our business. As the linguist Michael Toolan observes, 'The definition of literal word and sentence meanings [...] amounts to an appeal, in determining meanings, to the information enshrined in a reliable grammar and dictionary of language'. The *idea* that there is such a thing as literal reference acts as a sort of underlying 'guarantee' of the trustworthiness of

⁶⁶ George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 267.

language itself. Toolan calls it a 'deeply embedded convenience of Western thought'.⁶⁷

But, as readers of both de Man and Lee might already have noted, the attempt to talk *about* the literal is full of funny figures – figures for pragmatism – who linger for just a moment too long on the imagery within the above text, with its spade and its deeply embedded convenience, and we're back to plumbers and gardeners. The suspicion that literal language has something to do with work is further fuelled by the way Toolan demonstrates the *unreliability* of an appeal to the 'determining meanings' of the literal, via the example of 'John got the sack'. As Toolan explains, if 'literal meaning purports to express more "basic" or foundational meanings, those residing first in a sentence's component words', then a literal interpretation would read something like "John fetched/received the (nonrigid) container".⁶⁸

Toolan's staged misreading demonstrates the disjunction between a word's literal meaning and so-called 'intended meaning', the meaning a word acquires through use or context or habit. Putting the question of work, or employment, aside for now, I want to spend a few moments thinking about the funniness of literalism. It's a kind of funniness that can come across as either childish, or dad-like in its pedantry, or, in some contexts, superior and condescending, a form of linguistic conservatism (which is often not very funny at the time). In either case, it's often obstructive, interruptive. A sort of willful miscomprehension that refuses to acknowledge the meaning the words have acquired through usage or take on in a specific situated context. And yes, it can be funny: 'Are you trying to tell me that today John was dismissed from his employment? Or do you mean that he has fetched the nonrigid container?'. What really makes it funny, I think, is the way in which this literalising interpretation of the utterance retrieves the *thing*, the way it takes 'got the sack' and gets *the sack*. I mean, the non-rigid container, or the large bag made from a material such as hessian or thick paper and used for the storing or carrying of

⁶⁷ Michael Toolan, *Total Speech: An Integrational Linguistic Approach to Language*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 28.

⁶⁸ Toolan, p. 28.

goods.

I'm quoting *The Oxford English Dictionary* here, in order to suggest that the funniness of literalism has something to do with the idea of a definition. There is a disjunction between the serious-sounding language of definition, and what might be thought of as the *thingness* of the referent. Because it's not just that a literal interpretation mistakes 'got the sack' for 'fetched the non-rigid container', but that it replaces the word 'sack' with a description *of* a sack. It is as though, the effort to get ever closer to the 'base level' of reference – literal language – begets only more language (the language of patient explanation liable to make its speaker come across as either a high-minded pedant, or a sublimely simplistic literalist). A case in point: *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'hat' as 'a shaped covering for the head'.⁶⁹ This is the literal meaning of the word. Why does this dictionary definition make me feel like I want to laugh? It might have something to do with the excess of those five words, 'shaped covering for the head' standing in for just one: 'hat'. Why is it then, that it seems in this definition that the very thingness of the referent – the hatness of the hat, the sackness of the sack, the bagginess of the non-rigid container – is somehow making a mockery of the very idea of a definition, and thus of the supposedly clear, pure and direct language of truth? Making it seem somehow excessive and – crucially – *indirect*. 'Shaped covering for the head' seems to take us further away from 'hat', even as it seeks to get to the bottom of what a hat *really is*. The definition of 'hat' performs both the deferral and the odd presence of 'hat'. Indeed, the definition of the word 'hat' is so essentially hat that it isn't hat at all.

Serviceable, though. That word comes into play here. Lee's joke asks us to conceive of the tea cosy as a '*serviceable* hat'. And, it might be conjectured, in order to 'get' the joke, you do a bit of literalizing dictionary work yourself, you think, 'hat... shaped covering for the head... tea cosy... shaped covering of another sort... OK'. Shape, or form, is the defining quality. The shape is what the tea cosy and the hat have in common. It is also the basic factor in the

⁶⁹ This and all subsequent dictionary definitions from the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 11th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

functionality of both. And functionality is what is at stake, as intimated by that all-important qualifier *serviceable*. According to the dictionary, a serviceable item is one that is ‘fulfilling its function adequately; usable or in working order [...] functional and durable rather than attractive’. And there is some coincidence here, is there not, between the dictionary definition of *hat*, as ‘shaped covering for the head’, and the value of basic, un-fancy functionality designated by ‘serviceable’. The minimum requirements to be met by a ‘serviceable hat’ are that it cover the head, or to be more precise, that it in some sense *fit* the head it covers – hence ‘shaped’ rather than shapeless, formless or loose like, say, a scarf. And here we’re getting into another sort of discussion, I think. A discussion of aesthetics. In ‘A Plea for Excuses,’ Austin notes, ‘how much it is to be wished that similar field work will soon be undertaken in, say, aesthetics; if only we could forget for a while about the beautiful and get down instead to the dainty and the dumpy’.⁷⁰ Something affective is creeping in, a funniness around the idea of form, and its failure. Not the well-wrought urn, nor the even the mildly elegant-sounding ‘shaped covering’, but the form/less, the baggy, the dumpy.

A tea cosy might be *shaped* like a hat, but it is not a hat. Perhaps the tea cosy is too conspicuously *not* like a hat for the person in the bunker? Perhaps there is some falling-short, and/or some excess of hatness here. A tea cosy has holes at either side – one for the handle, one for the spout. So perhaps, for the joke’s subject (or, we might say, object), the bunker-bound American, the tea cosy appears *too much not a hat*, its non-hat qualities are too conspicuous. For Lee stipulates that the bunkered person would not be tempted to ‘see’ whether the tea cosy would make a serviceable hat. And to *see* is to understand – it might, perhaps, suggest a certain kind of relationship between the domain of the mental and that of the material. Because, anyway, the bunker is a hypothetical place, a place of the mind. Indeed, it is, somehow, an exaggerated figural evocation of what the purely hypothetical, the staged-for-the-purposes-of-theoretical-argument feels like; chilly. A tea cosy is warm, though. That’s the whole point of a tea cosy. And in this way, its function is similar to that of a

⁷⁰ Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 183.

certain kind of hat, a hat you'd wear not for show, but to keep your head warm. It may be, then, that the tea cosy does not fall short of, but *exceeds* the requirements of a serviceable hat. Because tea cosies are the kinds of homespun items often adorned with decorative features: bobbles, pompoms, tassels perhaps. And what is emerging here, perhaps, is a little friction about particularity, a distracting kind of decorativeness, which interjects a further incongruity between the idea of a serviceable hat (suggesting something plain, stripped of particularity, like the dictionary definition), and the whimsical, handcrafted, tasseled thing you might well imagine when you hear the words 'tea cosy'.

And here it becomes necessary to start asking questions about context. Because the way 'you' imagine the tea cosy, or whether or not you are *able* to bring an image of a tea cosy to mind, depends on certain circumstances – historical, cultural, and social. In order to 'get' the joke, you *do* need to know what a tea cosy is, and you need to know that there is a certain resemblance between a tea cosy and a hat. And, it might be argued that this is a culturally specific kind of knowledge: for a person brought up in the nation in which for many, tea drinking is a habitual, comforting but also in some sense a self-defining thing to do. This might well stir up affectionate and nostalgic feelings about home. For example, I am British, and when I hear or read the words 'tea cosy', I cannot help but envisage a blue tassled thing covering a stainless steel tea pot on the floor of a living room in a 1980s semi-detached house in the North of England where my mum and dad sit watching *Wogan*. It might be conjectured that, even if you *know* what a tea cosy is, and accept that it *could* be worn as a hat, perhaps you need to have a certain *familiarity* with tea cosies for this joke to really tickle you, to the extent that you laugh out loud.

At the end of this routine, Lee will stage an attempt to move on from the tea cosy material by delivering a decent 'topper', a line that will get a big enough laugh to make the 'bit' feel complete. But, as he acknowledges, the line, which contains a list of three woollen items, knitted things that might be found 'working' alongside the tea cosy, falls flat:

...the cardigan, the mitten, the balaclava helmet... you'll notice there a list of three things. Really they ought, comedically, to build. But the balaclava helmet was a disappointment. It didn't get the laugh one would be hoping for there.

He then explains that he 'knew this was going to happen', he has performed this same show numerous times – in Edinburgh for a month, and on tour – and in spite of his initially being certain the line would get a big laugh, it never worked. Apart, that is, from in Aldershot, 'which is a military town, so they probably have a different relationship with [the balaclava]' (64).

Aside from telling us something about social context, contingent associations, and identification with a particular place, the Aldershot reference points back into the routine to what is now emerging, even within the initial 'perfectly formed' part of the joke, as a suppressed military theme. It might be argued that Lee's 'American' could conceivably be replaced by any other person who might plausibly be represented as uncurious and the joke would still work. You don't need to be aware of current affairs or anything going on in the news to find this joke funny; the joke is a formal device, a bit of wordplay, self-contained, locked in its hermetically sealed bunker. And the bunker itself is merely a backdrop, a location. It could be replaced by any place of solitude. It is not intended to signify anything in and of itself. Because, after all, this is a joke about the simple possibility that a person left on their own with a tea cosy *could* put the tea cosy on their head, but does not. But, in the very first line of the joke, we were asked, were we not, to conceive of imprisoning an individual 'for sixty years in an empty underground bunker', and the idea of an 'underground bunker' itself carries an inference of wartime. Whether or not it was consciously registered at the time, there has been a suppressed theme of not only armed conflict, but also incarceration – senseless, inhumane incarceration at that – lurking within the joke all along, even before that jolting shift into the clumsy satire about innocent people unlawfully interned in Guantanamo Bay. The notional bunker may be hermetically sealed and – within the joke – it may signify a place removed from the world, but the connotations of the word 'bunker' pull us right back out *into* the world. And, the room in which the word is being uttered is in

the world too. This whole routine is taking place in a room in a world in which wars and human rights abuses of various kinds are taking place.

Against the backdrop of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and human rights abuses in Guantanamo Bay is there not some 'guilty inwardness' played out in the idea of a room full of people laughing at a tea cosy? Or am I in fact articulating my own anxieties about my year-long closeted reading? Yes, tea cosies exist in the external world too, but arguably the sort of knowledge that a reference to a tea cosy calls into play, as opposed to knowledge about wars and human rights, is trivial. The tea cosy is the sort of 'reference' that is making a mockery of referentialism, with its promise of access to the external world. It is a joke that thematizes precisely the kind of trivializing pleasure-in-things that it indulges.

7. Resisting the 'fit'

Can de Man help us here, or is he part of the problem? According to Caruth, 'far from denying language access to history' the ethical stakes of de Man's 'attempt to distinguish reference from natural law' concern the task of 'keeping history from being swallowed up by the power of abstraction'.⁷¹ Caruth tells us that this ambitious-sounding project is played out 'not only in de Man's statements about language' but 'most concretely' in the performance of his texts. Most particularly, Caruth argues, this can be *felt* in de Man's use of examples, which are weirdly, distractingly impactful. Caruth is referring to one of de Man's best-known essays, 'The Resistance to Theory', in which de Man explicitly addressed the objections to theory made in the name of referential reality.⁷² In Caruth's summation, de Man responded to such charges by 'arguing both conceptually for a resistance that stems from "within" theory and by associating this resistance with the additional connotation of something concrete, something like the resistance one feels upon impact'.⁷³

⁷¹ Caruth, p. 74.

⁷² Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

⁷³ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 74.

Could the demonstration that Lee is making with this joke be understood in these terms? In other words, could we read this joke as a response to the objections made against his 'deconstructive' comedy in the name of referential reality by arguing for a resistance that stems from 'within' comedy? I do not want to be too hasty to exonerate Lee, or deconstructive comedy, or comedic deconstruction. And anyway, de Man's concept of resistance itself remains somewhat abstract. What does this actually mean, in practice, in a text?

The joke sets up, allegorically, a little practical experiment, one designed to ascertain whether or not a person possesses a certain quality, an attribute, one that is desirable and perhaps necessary to being a politically engaged human. One that might be believed to be innate, or natural. In the set-up he says, of Americans, 'they're not a *naturally* curious people'. And then he draws a link between this lack of natural curiosity and a lack of interest in the world beyond one's home country, and by extension, to a lack of awareness of historical events: 'they don't know what's going on', 'Most Americans don't own passports'. And then, with the tea cosy figure, the well-wrought joke, he not only allows his audience to enjoy laughing at the idea of a person *not* wearing a tea cosy as a hat (which is actually the image of the person wearing tea cosy as a hat, i.e. by laughing they positivize the negative, recuperate it) but for them to enjoy the fact of their laughter as an affirmation of *their own* 'natural curiosity'. And because Lee has already linked an American *lack* of curiosity with their ignorance of world events (and therefore with the acts being perpetrated overseas by their government), according to the skewed logic of the joke, laughing at the tea cosy joke becomes tantamount to an act of political engagement and responsibility. By this logic, laughing at this joke means you are a good person, a responsible person, a British person.

These are the stakes of deconstruction. When you deconstruct its rhetoric, or when you observe the way that Stewart Lee allows it to deconstruct its *own* rhetoric, it becomes apparent this joke has its own self-legitimizing aesthetic ideology. If this goes unchallenged, then as a critical reader I might well end up praising this joke as a 'good joke' without acknowledging that I might well enjoy

this joke because it makes *me* feel like a 'good person'. The joke not only gives me occasion to indulge my pleasure-in-trivial-things, but to make an argument as to its validity *as a mode of engagement* with the world, and a *superior* one at that. When Caruth writes that, 'far from denying language access to history' de Man's 'attempt to distinguish reference from natural law' has to do with 'keeping history from being swallowed up by the power of abstraction' she is, I think, intimating the sort of deconstructive process I have demonstrated above.

In a footnote to the tea cosy joke's preamble, in the 2010 edition of his book, Lee writes,

I probably wouldn't write or perform something like this now. It seems glib, stereotypical, cheap and simplistic. It was funny at the time, though. Also, our failure to act entirely honorably in Iraq and Afghanistan alongside the USA means that, to the rest of the world, we're both the bad guys. You have to address that now.⁷⁴

This reminds us that, whereas an aesthetic or formalist mindset might lead us to argue that the best jokes are 'timeless,' stand-up comedy is a historically contingent, situated utterance. That's not to say that spoken comedy *only* works, or works best, in the 'moment' of its 'original' utterance. Indeed, at the very end of the tea cosy routine, Lee admits that he has, it seems, unwittingly appropriated the joke that started it all off:

some kid emailed me and he went, "You know that bit you do about people being so bored they wear tea cosies as hats?" I went, "Yeah." he goes, "Um, there's a Spike Milligan or a Billy Connolly joke like that," he said, "from 1972."

So, basically, I must have kind of remembered that and copied it (67).

The one-liner 'Never trust a man who, when left alone in a room with a tea cosy, doesn't try it on' has, according to Connolly's biographer Pamela Stephenson, who is also married to him, become something of a family motto. On her attempts to translate the line into Latin, Stephenson notes that that closest she has come is '*Hominem Iniocosum Non Diffidite* (Never trust a man who lacks a

⁷⁴ Lee, *How I Escaped*, p. 59.

sense of humour)'.⁷⁵ In this account, the initial tea cosy figure is no longer a joke spoken onstage but an aphorism. No longer contingent words spoken onstage for money, but something to live by. Although tongue-in-cheek, Stephenson's recourse to the 'motto' is a reminder of how the trivial can be taken as a model for the profound. It is a reminder to me not to mistake the fact that I find the idea of a person wearing a tea cosy on their head funny as the sound basis for an epistemology. And, it is a reminder of just how tempting it would be to do so because, according to Stephenson's model, the act of putting a tea cosy on one's head becomes emblematic of the comic as such. And upon this basis it becomes possible to make a series of totalizing inferences. It becomes possible to think of this as a joke in which, via the perfectly incongruous 'fit' of the joke's final word and image, the form coincides with the meaning. And the meaning is that it is right and natural to put the tea cosy on your head just as it is right and natural to have a sense of humour. These are reconciled, 'magically', it might be claimed, in the moment of performance. It is right and natural to find this joke funny, to laugh. It means I have a sense of humour. I *would* try the tea cosy as a hat because, in a sense, imaginatively, *I just did*. I am, therefore, included in the category of superior humanness that the joke constructs. I am its totalizing figure, magically reconciled with those other abstracted bodies as the joke's ideal audience, the personification of laughter. I am in the moment, the kind of moment that Noble seems to promise when he writes:

There is something thrilling and magical about that moment, and it is for that reason that it is so intriguing. The joy and success of it is in that moment... That moment where hundreds of people all feel the same joy and release of laughter at the same time.⁷⁶

How might I disentangle myself from this totalizing moment? Well, in the first place, keep going. Because the joke, the routine, the show keeps going. This is the professional condition of stand-up comedy; as Lee has said, 'in stand-up you don't have to think "What's my motivation?" The person's got a reason to be on stage, which is that they're an entertainer. They've got to fill up time.

⁷⁵ Pamela Stephenson, *Billy* (London: Harpercollins, 2001) p. 61.

⁷⁶ Noble, p. xi.

Their motivation is that they've got to fill up time...'⁷⁷

But also, de Man keeps going. As James Loxley writes,

de Man's concern is to show that reading is not the business of arriving at a single or final understanding of the text, the kind of reading that could rest fulfilled in its mastery: it is rather a matter of tracing out the necessary sequence of irreconcilable moves or moments on which a text depends, and therefore of failing to end up at a position from which the different moments or moves could all be comprehended at once or as one.⁷⁸

So, keep going. Keep following the irreconcilable moves. Keep telling the difference.

8. Wool is funny!

I am not yet done with this joke, because my task now is to investigate what kinds of possibilities, and critical responsibilities might come with the temporality of reading, and the particular temporality of my own reading. How can I account for the stubbornness of my fixation upon this figure? What critical possibilities might inhere in reading a stand-up routine long after its laughter has perished, even after the author of the joke has disavowed it, called it out of date? In this latter part of the chapter, then, my discussion will draw upon a set of theoretical perspectives that are distinct from, although related to, the deManian deconstructive project. My work here proceeds from the question of how it is that, even after all of this careful and patient elaboration as to the joke's workings, it still feels not only possible, but also perhaps important to return to the claim that there's just something *funny*, in a simple way, a silly and childish

⁷⁷ Andrew Haydon 'Stewart Lee: "The Most Controversial Thing You Can Do is Be Sincere in a World of Irony"', *Exeunt Magazine* (19 October 2015) <<http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/stewart-lee-the-most-controversial-thing-you-can-do-is-be-sincere-in-a-world-of-irony/>> [accessed 17 August 2016].

⁷⁸ Loxley, pp. 93-4.

way, about the idea of a knitted tea cosy working in a shop.

Lee's book, on its back cover, promise to explain 'why "wool" is a funny word'. Inside, on the question of wool, Lee offers this: "'Wool" is a brilliant, all-purpose funny word. Few things are not made funnier if one imagines them being made out of, or coated in, wool' (62). Is this an explanation? Or is it, by means of continuing the joke, the deflection, the deferral of explanation? Is explanation even desirable, or relevant, or possible? How might we go about developing an explanation as to the funniness of wool, that is, both the word and the material?

In her delineation of how new 'aesthetic categories' might be developed for the twenty-first century, Sianne Ngai's proposes the 'zany', the 'cute' and the 'merely interesting' as aesthetics based not on 'powerful feelings evoked by rare experiences of art or nature', but on 'milder or equivocal feelings'. The cute, for example, is connected with 'ostensibly subordinate and unthreatening commodities' that bring forth a 'surprisingly wide spectrum of feelings, ranging from tenderness to aggression'.⁷⁹ Whether or not you accept the particular narrative she offers, Ngai's work suggests that, far from being a 'universal' or transhistorical phenomenon, the lure of a certain kind of 'naïve' or childish pleasure in things can be given a properly historical account.

In light of Ngai's description of the cute as 'an unusually intense yet strangely ambivalent kind of empathy',⁸⁰ I'd like to now turn to what is, perhaps, the most peculiarly funny part of the entire tea cosy routine: the moment at which the figure of the tea-cosy-shop-assistant, after coming into being, acquires the power of speech. There are two lines: a question, and an answer. Both spoken by Lee, but in different guises. First: 'Hello, I don't know if you can help me. I'm interested in buying one of those iPods.' And the reply: 'I'm sorry sir, I won't be able to help you on account of the fact that I am fashioned entirely from colourful wool' (62).

This moment prompts a return to the question of persons and things, and a

⁷⁹ Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 3.

⁸⁰ Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 4.

turning to Barbara Johnson's work, concerned as it is in large part with the question: what is a person? The linguist Émile Benveniste asked the question of the person through his study of personal pronouns, arguing that third-person pronouns should not be named 'personal': for Benveniste this 'simply destroys the notion of "person"', which properly belongs only to the first- and second-person pronouns, 'I' and 'you'. On this basis Johnson surmises that the way to treat a thing as a person is to 'address it, turn it into an interlocutor or at least a listener through the rhetorical power of language.'⁸¹ The two rhetorical figures involved in this act of animation-through-address that are of interest here are apostrophe and prosopopoeia, two literary effects associated with lyric poetry. As I will argue, the comparison between lyric poetry and stand-up comedy – particularly the stand-up comedy of Stewart Lee – is not as unlikely as it may at first seem. Both are characterized by complex and shifting structures of address.

Apostrophe is the poetic figure of 'addressing a dead or absent person, an animal, a thing, or an abstract quality or idea as if it were alive, present and capable of understanding'⁸². It is derived from the Ancient Greek, for 'turning away', so in simple terms we could imagine the poet physically turning away from the reader in order to address a Grecian Urn (Keats) or to intone 'O chestnut-tree' (Yeats) or 'O West wind' (Shelley). And, as a reader of Lee's text, I imagine him, onstage, turning away from the audience to address the imaginary presence. And, when I watch the DVD, this is what he does do. He slowly turns and looks toward a spot on the floor in the middle of the stage and says 'Hello, I don't know if you can help me. I'm interested in buying one of those iPods.'

An apostrophe is a form of poetic invocation, which means that it calls something to the scene. Here, at the scene of imaginary address, the tea cosy, having been summoned by a question, must reply. It does so, or appears to do so, via the rhetorical trope of prosopopoeia, defined as 'either of the

⁸¹ Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 6.

⁸² Johnson, pp. 6-7.

personification of some non-human being or idea, or of the representation of an imaginary, dead, or absent person as alive and capable of speech⁸³. The word derives from the Greek for 'to confer a mask' and, in simple terms, prosopopoeia performs 'face making' through the conferral of the power of speech: to have a voice is to have a mouth is to have a face. To address and be addressed is to be face-to-face. And onstage Lee, speaking as the tea cosy, could be seen to lend the tea cosy figure *his* face. But for now I don't want to think about Lee's face, I want to think about what kind of impossible face, or form, the tea-cosy-shop-assistant-figure might be taking, or refusing to quite take, in my mind. In 'The Epistemology of Metaphor', de Man characterises prosopopoeia as emblematic of the figurative function of language, which he equates with a capacity to 'make present to the senses something which is not within their reach because it consists, in whole or in part, of elements too abstract for sensory perception'.⁸⁴ The tea cosy has already, on its way here, been figured as a thing capable of being treated as a terror suspect, interned illegally and 'repeatedly anally raped'. That happened almost too quickly for perception to catch up, and anyway, it is difficult and absurd to envisage a woollen item undergoing such brutalities, and we know Lee is alluding to a human when he makes these references. But that is not to say that we feel comfortable imagining a human being subjected to this treatment – perhaps it is *this* dehumanization that is unpicturable. And hence, perhaps, the displacement of our empathy for a human onto the funny thing of the tea cosy.

Tracing the origins of the aesthetic she names 'cuteness', Ngai cites one of the earliest recorded uses of the word, in an 1857 issue of *Virginia Illustrated*: "'What cute little socks!" said the woman'.⁸⁵ And then there's 'A small and compact house, what the Americans would call "cute"', from 1900 *Daily News* – as Ngai notes, this is 'both a feminine and a nationally specific way of using language'.⁸⁶ Thus, it seems that from its first emergence as 'a distinctive judgment and style in nineteenth-century America', the cute was associated not

⁸³ Baldick, 'Prosopopoeia', p.207.

⁸⁴ de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, p.30.

⁸⁵ Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 59.

⁸⁶ Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 60.

only with that which is little, soft (and quite possibly knitted), but also with a distinctly feminized mode of speech. It is also worth acknowledging a certain irony in my recourse to something identified, at its inception, with a specifically American mode of exclamation to account for the funniness of an explicitly American-mocking joke.

And, as Ngai argues, speech is at stake here, for ‘though our first impulse is to think of the cute in visual or tactile terms, the *OED*’s definition interestingly directs our attention first and foremost to ways of speaking, both on the part of those who judge objects/person as cute [...] and on the part of cute objects or persons themselves’.⁸⁷ The exclamation of cuteness reflects a longing for littleness, but it also belittles the beholder: the person transfixed by cuteness might well raise the pitch of their voices, scrunch up their faces and resort to a form of ‘baby talk’. Cuteness is not only a mode of identification, of speech, but also a physical demeanour by which the people who *care for* the small things, the things considered trivial, *themselves* become small, trivial.

Perhaps now it becomes possible to revisit the scene in which, when asked by his wife Edith whether he wants to have his bowling shoes laced over or laced under, Archie Bunker answers with a question: ‘What’s the difference?’. As de Man points out, Archie is *not literally asking* for the difference to be explained to him, but is making a rhetorical statement to the effect of ‘I don’t give a damn what the difference is’.⁸⁸ But let us take a moment, once again, to recall Edith Bunker’s patient elaboration of *the difference*, the difference about which neither her impatient husband nor Paul de Man seems to ‘give a damn’ – the difference between two methods of lacing her husband’s bowling shoes. It could be argued that Edith responds to Archie’s cry of ‘what’s the difference?’ in the ‘simplistic’ way that she does precisely because *the difference* does matter to her – because it concerns the process of tending to the objects her husband takes for granted. Edith is talking about, attesting to, the daily tasks of her domestic labour, and – like the labour itself – her testimony is unacknowledged, dismissed as immaterial. We are getting closer, perhaps, to being able to listen

⁸⁷ Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 60.

⁸⁸ de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, p. 9.

with retrained ears to Edith Bunker, a woman who is silenced when she begins to account for the *work* she does. Perhaps the 'inherent' funniness of wool might also be explained by Edith Bunker, if we would listen.

Knitting – traditionally the work of mother, the grandmother – can also be thought of as a form of feminized domestic labour. And so perhaps the supposed inherent funniness of wool has to do, on some level, with the notion of a feminized simplicity, one that is transferred onto, absorbed into, the knitted thing itself? It might be said that wool itself is a quiet thing. Just as it can be used to insulate, to keep warm, it can be used to muffle sound. Might we speculate that what is going on in the sly belittling of the knitted item like a tea cosy is a muffling of certain voices, then, a refusal to hear certain patient explanations of the caring work of the household? The other items that Lee lists as working in the shop – the cardigan, the mittens, the balaclava – along with the tea cosy, all carry a connotation of being wrapped up, cared for, and perhaps *over*-cared for. To be 'coated in wool' is to be insulated, muffled. It makes me think of the word 'mollycoddled', which the dictionary tells me means to 'treat indulgently or overprotectively' or – as a noun, now fallen out of use – 'an effeminate man or boy'.

If as Ngai suggests, there is a connection between cuteness as a commodity aesthetic and the objects and behaviours associated with the feminized domestic sphere, this link is even more strongly emphasized by Lori Merish who, in an earlier account of the cute commodity, proposes that the cute 'always in some way designates a commodity in search of its mother'.⁸⁹ At this point, we may wish to remind ourselves of Karl Marx's demarcation, and critique, of the phenomenon of commodity fetishism, a succinct summation of which is provided by Johnson. For Marx, she writes, commodity fetishism named a 'tendency to feel a human relation with the product and forget the human labour that produced it'. Johnson tells of how this 'misguided

⁸⁹ Lori Merish, 'Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics' in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, edited by Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), pp. 185-203, p. 186.

transference of humanness from the maker to the product'⁹⁰ is likened by Marx to 'all that is irrational in religion and mysticism [...] to the false worship of things, and to the desire for magic and mystery that mature human beings should outgrow'.⁹¹ It seems that an association of childishness is built into Marx's concept. And, when the commodity fetish is experienced in the particularly intense and conflicted way associated with cuteness, this desire becomes grafted onto what Merish calls 'a middle-class structure of familial, expressly maternal emotion'.⁹²

In the second chapter of the first volume of *Capital*, 'The Process of Exchange', Marx offers a series of curious illustrations of the relation between humans and commodities. First, as if speaking man-to-man, he bids his readers to picture themselves as the 'guardians' of commodities, since they 'cannot go to market and perform exchanges in their own right'.⁹³ This is, as Ngai notes, an image of 'paternal benevolence'. But then the tone shifts: 'commodities', writes Marx, 'lack the power to resist man. If they are unwilling, he can use force; in other words, he can take possession of them'.⁹⁴ Now, commodities are to be thought of as, in Ngai's words, not only 'helpless beings in need of adult supervision' but also 'as objects of potential seduction or even rape'.⁹⁵ Next he likens the commodity to a female character in Don Quixote named Maritornes who is 'sexually interchangeable with the other women to the oblivious hero, who thus ends up becoming her lover in spite of her infamous lack of charm'.⁹⁶ Marx is offering these comparisons mockingly: he wants the reader to recognize the indecency of the commodity fetish.⁹⁷ But this could be read as example of the recurring patterns of feminine effacement that Barbara Johnson detects throughout Western thought.

⁹⁰ Johnson, *Persons and Things*, p. 21.

⁹¹ Johnson, *Persons and Things*, p. 22.

⁹² Merish, p. 186.

⁹³ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, *A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1992), p. 178.

⁹⁴ Marx, p. 178.

⁹⁵ Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 61.

⁹⁶ Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 61.

⁹⁷ For a more thorough consideration of the literary qualities of Marx's 'satire' see Keston Sutherland, 'Marx in Jargon,' in Keston Sutherland, *Stupefaction: A Radical Anatomy of Phantoms* (London: Seagull Books, 2011), pp. 26-90.

In the final, prosopopoeic flourish of his satire, Marx illustrates his argument with a little vignette in which he asks his reader to imagine commodities speaking.

If commodities could speak, they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it is no part of us as objects. What does belong to us as objects... is our value. Our own intercourse as commodities proves it. We relate to each other merely as exchange-values.⁹⁸

It is ironic that, as Johnson points out, 'Marx makes commodities speak precisely in order to make them confess the illusion of animation they promote'.⁹⁹ But, as she argues, the animation is a little too strong, and threatens to overpower the argument. The commodities, now they can speak, seem to promise to entertain us all the more, with their social intercourse, their chit-chat. Ngai sums it up when she reflects on how, 'for all his distancing sarcasm, Marx seems compelled to repeat commodity fetishism's personification of the commodity'.¹⁰⁰

9. How would that possibly work?

In some vague sense, the tea cosy speaks precisely to confess the illusion of animation it promotes, because when the tea cosy speaks, it says: 'I'm sorry sir, I won't be able to help you on account of the fact that I am fashioned entirely out of colourful wool... Perhaps you'd like to ask one of my colleagues – the cardigan, the mitten, the balaclava helmet' (62-3).

The tea cosy speaks precisely of its fashioning, how it was made. If Marx is right, and by anthropomorphizing an object, 'one transfers the social character of labor into a sociability among objects, sucking the humanness out of the makers and injecting it into the products',¹⁰¹ then we might ask, is the tea cosy's

⁹⁸ Marx, pp. 176-177.

⁹⁹ Johnson, *Persons and Things*, p. 22.

¹⁰⁰ Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 61.

¹⁰¹ Johnson, *Persons and Things*, p. 21.

animation in this context another episode of feminine effacement?

And when I write 'this context', you might ask, am I thinking about a branch of Currys in Wolverhampton, or the scene of Stewart Lee's performance of this routine? I will attend to each in turn. First, staying within the scene of Currys in Wolverhampton, is not there not something funny about the idea of an electrical superstore – a place of hard edges, technical sales speak, the 'latest technologies', such as (in 2004) iPods, with their built-in obsolescence – staffed by all of these faintly nostalgic, saggy, motherly, knitted objects? And the (male) tea cosy's humiliation becomes palpable when, granted the power of speech, it is forced to enact a scene in which it apologizes (to a male customer, a 'Sir') for its knittedness 'I'm sorry sir, I won't be able to help you on account of the fact I'm *fashioned entirely out of colourful wool*'. In this man-to-man exchange, one that takes place in – can we conjecture – the stereotypically male 'music and hi-fi' section of an electrical superstore, the tea cosy is rendered ineffectual by its softness, and its decorativeness (precisely the opposite of the products it is being asked to promote) – for precisely the elements that render it appealingly cute, and that link it with the feminized domestic sphere.

And then it says, 'Perhaps you'd like to ask one of my colleagues – the cardigan, the mitten, the balaclava helmet'. And at this point Lee cuts in, and the routine switches again.

And you'll notice there a list of three things. Really they ought, comedically, to build. But the balaclava helmet was a disappointment. It didn't get the laugh one would be hoping for there. Umm... (63)

Once again Lee breaks off his telling of the joke to acknowledge its failure. Referring to the show's run at the Edinburgh Fringe, he continues,

So the first kind of week of the run, the month run, I kept swapping the order around, I was going, "Perhaps you'd like to talk to one of my colleagues, the balaclava helmet, mitten, cardigan. Cardigan, balaclava helmet, mitten," whatever. And after weeks, still nothing... It never got any laughs.

After about ten days, a friend, the Actor Kevin Eldon (whose humorously ceremonial nickname will be familiar to those who knew Lee's work in the 1990s, when he worked in partnership with Richard Herring) comes to see the show.

And, erm... I said to him, 'Why do you think that isn't working?' And he said, 'Well, the problem is, all the items in your list are made of wool. And the tea cosy has already said to the customer that it won't be able to help him on account of the fact that it is made of wool. So for the tea cosy to suggest to the customer that he seeks assistance from other exclusively woollen items, you know it simply adds insult to injury, it makes the situation worse.'

When Lee asks for advice as to what he should do, Eldon replies, 'Well, just think of three things that aren't made of wool, then you'll be alright'. But Lee's problems continue. He tries to improvise, 'live in the moment', but the next night onstage he can only manage to come up with 'The stick, the wood, the toaster'. No laughs, 'And I went home, and I thought, Yeah, the problem is the toaster is an electrical item and people are thinking, "Is that working in Curry's or is it for sale there?"' (65)

The toaster instigates a further confusion between people and things. It also usefully highlights an important distinction: in the space of the electrical superstore, the tea cosy is *not a commodity*, but is *working* – or, as it may be, *not working*. 'How would that possibly *work*?' asks the prosopopoeised audience figure. And the tea cosy responds by rather politely explaining the reasons why it *cannot work*: 'I'm sorry, sir, I won't be able to help you,' it says, 'on account of the fact that I am fashioned entirely from colourful wool.' The tea cosy cites its material constitution, the method of its production, as precisely the reason it cannot 'help'. Although it can appear here, the tea cosy cannot fulfill the job description of 'shop assistant'; it states this explicitly – it cannot assist, cannot help. But it might equally have said, 'I'm sorry, sir, I cannot be *of service*'. And, that word, 'service' takes on an added significance in the context of Currys in Wolverhampton, for electrical superstores can be considered

among the post-Fordist or, as Ngai calls them, 'postmodern workplaces' that operate within an increasingly service-based economy. In this context, the idea of being a 'productive worker' is less dependent upon quantitative data (such as output) and more upon qualitative factors, which include the 'subjective attitudes' of the individuals employed. Ngai cites the developing discourse around 'affective labour', drawing on the work of a range of sociologists, economists and activists to describe a 'post-Fordist reorientation of the workplace toward the production of "productive subjectivity" which has resulted in the increasing emotionalization of work in general'.¹⁰² The kinds of labour commonly designated as 'affective' include jobs in the services sector, many of which are based implicitly or explicitly on women's unpaid caring work in the household. Hence, perhaps, the retail worker's solicitous enquiry: 'Are you being looked after?'

At this moment, it might be useful to revisit, briefly, Paolo Virno's influential conflation of the post-Fordist labourer with the virtuoso performer.¹⁰³ According to Virno, the collapsing of the distinction between intellectual labour ('solitary and inconspicuous') and physical labour ('the production of new objects, a repetitive and foreseeable process') in the post-Fordist workplace¹⁰⁴ leads to all work taking on the characteristic of performance. In the post-Fordist era, virtuosity 'becomes the prototype of all wage labour',¹⁰⁵ and in the virtuoso, Virno seeks to invoke 'the special capabilities of the performing artist', more specifically, the *speaker as performing artist*. This is because, 'When "subjective" cooperation becomes the primary productive force, labour activities display a marked linguistic-communicative quality'.¹⁰⁶ It is ironic, therefore, that the tea cosy can be granted the power of speech, thus given face, made to appear, precisely as a result of the virtuosic work of a professional comedian, who is certainly a contender for the paradigmatic example of the *speaker as performing artist*. Doubly ironic that the ability to speak, to face, to appear and deliver the polite address to another, a 'sir', is – according to the political theory

¹⁰² Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 10.

¹⁰³ Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2004).

¹⁰⁴ Virno, p. 50.

¹⁰⁵ Virno, p. 61.

¹⁰⁶ Virno, p. 62.

of Virno (et al) – *precisely what is required* of the post-Fordist laborer.

Revisiting, then, the question of the dehumanization of capitalism – here, rather than a displacement of the humanity of the maker onto the product, we have a third displacement – of the anthropomorphism of the product back onto the worker. And so, oddly, we are looking at a displacement of a displacement, which is perhaps why there is such a surprisingly complex push-pull of identification and alienation going on here.

10. Herded up onstage

And so to the scene of performance, a comedy club called The Stand in Glasgow, where *Stand-Up Comedian* was filmed for the DVD from which the transcript is taken. Attending *this* scene reminds us that the tea cosy is *not* a tea cosy, nor is it a worker in an electrical superstore, it is merely a figure of speech, one that has been 'fashioned' by Stewart Lee. Think of the scene, the scene of speech, of performance, and imagine Stewart Lee as he appears onstage. Holding a microphone, speaking, making it seem spontaneous. The 'fashioning' of this moment, the moment at which a tea cosy 'magically' acquires the power of speech has been plotted, step by step, to *seem* like an accident – as a result of the childish inability of a part of audience to look beyond the funny idea of a tea cosy as shop assistant in order to understand Lee's sophisticated and topical satire. But also, the sense that this is *something Stewart Lee is doing*.

When it says 'I'm sorry sir, I won't be able to help you on account of the fact that I am fashioned entirely from colourful wool', on one level the tea cosy is apologizing for its lack of humanness – that it lacks a human body. But, the agency that the power of speech bestows upon the tea cosy is voicing its apology through the medium *of* a human body. In spite of the cartoonish silliness of acting out a little scene featuring a tea cosy shop assistant, Lee's enactment could by no means be described as 'animated'. Quite the opposite. He barely moves, and when he does, he moves extremely slowly and, it

appears, reluctantly. He shifts position, steps to his right, looks down toward ground level and delivers the first line, 'Hello. I don't know if you can help me', thus granting the tea cosy a position, and designating an empty space for the imaginary tea cosy to occupy. Then, slowly, he shifts again, turns his body around and steps into that space. He starts to hunch his shoulders, very slowly, and angles his face, his large face with its intense and serious look, up toward the position he has just vacated, that of the imagined customer. This is funny. We understand what he is trying to do, and we understand that it is ridiculous and impossible: there's no way he can get small enough to embody the tea cosy convincingly. His stoop is half-hearted, but the effect is strangely abject. Like he is doing something humiliating, something he doesn't want to do, but has to. As a mime, it is willfully half-arsed, as if to emphasize the fact that Lee cannot get small enough to embody the tea cosy convincingly. The tea cosy is being made to appear, reluctantly, by Stewart Lee – it is he who, after all, has 'fashioned' this entire thing, as a joke-gone-wrong, a deconstruction of his own joke-rhetoric. But we might think of it the other way too: *the tea cosy is making Stewart Lee appear*, making his body conspicuous. It might be that I am led to argue this because, when I watch the DVD of *Stand-Up Comedian*, the camera zooms right in on his face at this point, as though it were searching for the quality of woolness for which Lee's face is (apparently) straining, and failing, to emit. It is as though Lee's face is somehow all the more *there* due to its comical failure to look anything like a knitted tea cosy.

About Marx's little scene, the one in which he attempts, apparently against the logic of his argument, to make the commodities themselves decry the delusion of their personhood, Ngai writes that its peculiarity lies in the way that Marx 'asks his readers to imagine commodities speaking like child actors herded up on stage'.¹⁰⁷ And Stewart Lee seems, at some level, to be asking his audience to see him as though he were an overgrown child actor 'herded up' on stage, someone with ambitions to be a political comedian, a topical satirist, forced to undertake a humiliating mime act by an audience mindlessly enthralled by a funny, fuzzy object they are intent upon bringing to life. What this is playing up

¹⁰⁷ Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 61.

in performance, perhaps, is the humiliating fact that Stewart Lee stands on a stage and makes people laugh for money. This is increasingly, part of his curmudgeonly shtick: early in 2016 I saw him onstage at the Royal Festival Hall bemoaning the fact that, as a middle-aged father of two who spends all of his evenings performing, he has to resort to telling 'kids do the funniest things' jokes onstage simply in order to generate enough material to earn enough money to keep up the repayments on his mortgage.

What might a live audience in 2004 have felt when they watched Lee, then younger, the eponymous 'stand-up comedian' of the show they had paid to see, doing his reluctant, slow, petulantly half-arsed mime? Did it become apparent to them, in a funny way, that this overgrown child-man was being paid to stand there and entertain them by pretending to be a hand-made woollen item associated with the feminized domestic sphere displaced, by some figural aberration, into an electrical superstore, apologizing for its inability to help an imaginary customer buy an iPod?

Here I must acknowledge that, in spite of my extended close reading, I thus far omitted one of the moves of the jokes. When Lee first intones, on behalf of the audience, the question of the tea cosy: 'What's confusing us here in Glasgow is the idea of a tea cosy working as a shop assistant in a branch of Currys in Wolverhampton. How would that possibly work?', Lee (as himself) replies,

And again, Glasgow, I say to you, I don't know. I don't know how that would work. But what I say to you is, 'Could a tea cosy working as a shop assistant in a branch of Curry's actually be any less effective than some of the people currently employed there?'

In all the various earlier versions of my discussion of this joke, I have been selective in my quotation, leaving out this part because I cannot quite make it fit with my argument. In a footnote, Lee also makes some effort to disown this joke:

I probably wouldn't make a joke about stupid shop assistants today. Not because it's not necessarily true, but because it's the kind of joke you

see on all those production-company landfill TV comedy sketch shows ... in which privileged, middle-class actor-comedians do impressions of what they imagine the working classes are like (62).

Only now, with my retrained ears, do I begin to listen to what Lee is saying here. We have returned to the question of class. But now the 'working classes' are not represented solely, or primarily, by the romanticized handymen, bricklayers and plumbers, the manual laborers invoked by those artists and theorists of the 1960s and 70s; they are retail workers, service sector employees, persons paid not to produce things or make stuff with their hands but to stand up all day, smile and address the customer (who is always right) with an offer of service, or 'help'.

Perhaps, then, in the context of my reading of a text of a live comedy performance staged in Britain in the early twenty-first century, listening to Edith Bunker 'with retrained ears' has to do with rethinking the associations of 'manual' labour – updating our understanding of the 'class distinction' cited by Jackson. My feelings about the tea cosy led me to cuteness as delineated by Sianne Ngai, who suggests we retune our critical attention toward aesthetic experiences that revolve around images of insignificance, and triviality. And, Ngai argues, in contrast with Schillerean aesthetics, according to which great art promises 'the autonomy from forms of domination and mastery', these weak aesthetic moments 'confront us with images of the domination and even the humiliation of others in a world fundamentally rent by the division of labour', and, she adds, 'by gendered and racialized divisions of labour in particular'.¹⁰⁸ This renders problematic the fact of looking, and looking again, at Stewart Lee who, as a white middle class man with a degree from Oxford and a successful career in the media, is a member of a privileged class, and I do not seek to deflect this. However, although the case should not be overstated, it is arguable that, since stand-up comedy is a dominant mode of popular entertainment dominated by men not unlike Lee, and since mainstream comedy in Britain is a place where class anxiety has, since the days of Alf Garnett, been worked through, it does feel important to work out the ways in which 'just a man on a

¹⁰⁸ Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 18.

stage in a room' ends up *standing for* all manner of other persons and things.

The part of Lee's tea cosy routine to which I find myself returning, unable to resolve, is a scene of enactment. An embarrassed resurgence of the theatrical within the anti- or post-theatrical. But this theatricality is linked to a mode of performing that embraces a sort of wilful crapness. There is a half-heartedness or reluctance in his performance, as though Lee were 'acting' only under some kind of compulsion – even if that compulsion usually comes, dramaturgically and textually, from *within* the structure of the show, which we know to have been created (either solely or partly) by the person standing in front of us. My work in this chapter has led me to observe that this is a ridiculous and complex moment that also seems to tell us something about the humiliation and domination of the 'service economy', the retail sector, in which what is required of the worker is that they animate their service-selves in face-to-face encounters, no matter how reluctant they feel.

CHAPTER 3

Theatrical histories and sculptural funniness: watching Kinkaleri's / *Cenci/Spettacolo* (2004)

1. Bit of Business with the Microphone

How does the performance begin? If, as I stated in my Introduction, there is a kind of performance that not only emphasizes, but might be thought to be constituted entirely by an act of speech, then, strictly speaking, the performance only 'begins' when the performer has walked on, or stepped up to a microphone and, in the silence that has fallen, *begins to speak*. But there is something about this that does not quite feel right. Because before the first words are spoken, before the 'Hello', or the 'Good evening', or the 'Thank you, it's great to be back', there was already a performance happening. When we entered, the room was buzzing with a special sort of low-level anticipation. When we found our seats, and turned to the stage, it was already lit, set up and ready. And when the lights went down, and the room fell silent, and the lights went up again, more brightly this time, even in those few seconds before the performer came onto the stage, there was something exerting a stage presence all of its own: the microphone. There on its stand, in the middle of the stage, plugged in, and switched on, ready.

The work in this chapter began with the following question: how might I make the microphone itself available (that is, tangible, audible) as an object of enquiry? Is the kind of work demanded by the object of the microphone a *materialist* enquiry? In their 2014 collection, *Performing Objects and Theatrical Things*, Marlis Schweitzer and Joanne Zerdy suggest we pay 'attention to the way that objects and things powerfully script, choreograph, direct, push, pull, and otherwise animate their human collaborators', and think of props, or other theatrical objects as 'active agents performing alongside rather than behind or

in service to human performers'.¹ In demarcating their area of interest, Schweitzer and Zerdy are drawing on what Bill Brown, in his now classic 2001 essay, named 'Thing Theory'. Brown is drawing on Heidegger's differentiation between objects and so-called *things* in order to reflect on the prevalence of a certain sort of thing-centric, or, as it might be called, 'new materialist', criticism in the 1990s. Broadly speaking, this critical project had to do with an effort to move beyond anthropocentric understandings of production and exchange. As Jane Bennett notes, 'There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity. What is perhaps different today is that the higher degree of infrastructure and technological complexity have rendered this harder to deny'.²

According to Brown, we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us³. Unlike things, objects are what we look *through*, 'to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture – above all, what they disclose about *us*'. Thus, *objects* function like windows: we use them, but we don't really encounter them, whereas a *thing* is like a window when it gets filthy – it is a blockage or interruption of 'the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition'. For Brown, it is during such 'occasions of contingency', when the drill breaks, the car stalls, or you trip over some toy, that objects assert themselves as things'.⁴

Brown's formulations are particularly apt to the thing of the microphone, are they not? When a microphone is working, you speak *through* it. Hooked up to the in-house public address, or P.A. system, the microphone is connected, literally, to a 'channel'. It amplifies, enhances what flows through it. I have in mind a generic kind of microphone: its bulbous end, the place for speaking, covered in mesh or perhaps a cover of black foam, attached to a black slightly fluted shaft, which can slot into the plastic holder at the top of a vertical boom microphone stand. It usually has a wire (although wireless options are possible),

¹ Marlis Schweitzer and Joanne Zerdy (eds.), 'Introduction: Object Lessons', in *Performing Objects and Theatrical Things* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 1-20 (p. 6).

² Jane Bennett, 'The Agency of the Assemblage', *Public Culture*, 17:3 (2005), 445-65 (p. 463).

³ Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 28:1 (2001), 1-22 (p. 3).

⁴ Brown, p. 4.

and it usually hides a little ‘on-off’ switch somewhere too. This is the kind of microphone I’m familiar with, that I’ve requested, made use of on countless occasions: a standard-issue microphone, not there to be looked at, but used, it is merely what it is, a convenient and functional way of making things louder. It’s part of the onstage ‘set-up’ but it has the status of ‘equipment’ rather than ‘prop’ or even ‘scenery’. Like Brown’s window, it does not hide, but neither is it there to be looked at. You notice it when it goes wrong, but may well pay very little attention to it when it’s working.

Paying attention to the material thing itself, the microphone with its history of production, its implicatedness in systems of ‘the circuits of production, distribution, consumption and exhibition’ is a cultural materialist way of approaching the question of speech, performance and joking. And in my previous chapter, there was much anxiety over the question of history, and the question of its abstraction. Therefore, perhaps a chapter examining the microphone – a materialist historical chapter – will function as a corrective to the previous chapter’s various convolutions and wormholes. Unlike Stewart Lee’s tea cosy, in a sense, the microphone is straightforwardly *there*. And yet there is always already something complicated about the material presence of the microphone, because as a thing-in-itself, it is useless. An unplugged microphone is ‘dead’. It only becomes ‘live’ when it is plugged into a system.

When a professional performer steps up to a ‘live’ microphone and begins to speak, they are becoming part of a material system over which they may well have very little control. This is particularly the case for ‘gigging’ performers, comedians who, just starting out, might well spend several years working their way around ‘the circuit’, performing on mixed bills and at open-mic nights. The microphone is the site at which the gigging performer or professional speaker must negotiate the professional structure of the venue or institution: the room, the stuff in the room, the ‘system’ (the ‘public address system’). Importantly, this is also the moment at which the performer must negotiate with, ask for help from, another sort of professional: the technician. Here, a set of professional tensions comparable to those discussed in the previous chapter, tensions that concern the division between intellectual and manual labour, between worker

and 'artiste', might well be brought into play. What makes this particularly interesting as a site of negotiation is that, unlike, say a professional oboist or trumpet player, whose instrument travels with them, the person who speaks for a living has to make do with the the venue provides. The performer may well know a lot less (or practically nothing) about how to set up and use the microphone than the technician. However, this performer's relationship with the microphone is intimate, even erotic. It is tempting, after all, to put ones mouth right up against the microphone, and hearing the sound of ones merest whisper or breath amplified so that it overtakes a room can be curiously pleasurable. This evocation of the breath, the spit and the mouth signals the way in which it is near-impossible for me to think about the microphone without calling upon my own professional experiences as a performer who speaks into microphones. Because performing onstage is a peculiarly intense experience, my relationship with the microphone – as an object of professional negotiation, anxiety and pleasure – might also be said to be peculiarly intense. And this opens onto the question of the personal, and its role in this enquiry. For, having started out on an effort to conduct some proper historical research into the object of the microphone, I hit upon a problem: my research methodology in this thesis is explicitly framed and driven by 'what I find funny'. Do I therefore need to start to will myself to find the microphone funny in order to study it? This put some pressure on my methodology. For is the question of 'what I find funny' not too contingent, too biased, too partial; indeed, is this recourse to personal likes and whims not, in the context of historical enquiry, downright improper? The remainder of this chapter is a case in point. It began as an attempt to do proper historical work on the microphone as a piece of stage equipment, a tool for talking. But then my attention was directed (some might say *misdirected*) to a particular performance, a piece of what might be called 'postmodern' theatre, in which an onstage microphone seemed to be playing an oddly funny role. / *Cenci/Spettacolo*, by the Italian company Kinkaleri, at the KunstenFESTIVALdesarts in Brussels in 2004.⁵ I will explain the circumstances of my spectatorship in due course. For now, suffice it to say that, upon watching

⁵ Kinkaleri, *I Cenci/Spettacolo*, premiered 8 May 2004 KunstenFESTIVALdesartes, Theatre 140, Brussels, performance, available online, Vimeo, 2 August 2015, <<https://vimeo.com/135171545>> [accessed 4 August 2016].

this performance I found it was *the kind of performance I like*, the kind of performance I spent some years of the previous decade trying to create, and I found it very funny. I experienced a feeling that I was moved to name as 'love'. I loved the performance and I found it intensely, almost unbearably funny. And it might be said that this moment of identification and recognition, one involving the microphone, subverted, interrupted my proper historical research

It is possible to argue that the history of the microphone is a history of interruption. Electrical amplification of public address is recorded from as early as 1919, mainly at sports events and civic events (for example, noted successful uses of the early systems include the U.S. presidential conventions of 1920, Warren Harding's subsequent inauguration, and his dedication in 1921 of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier⁶). But, as far as *indoor* electroacoustic amplification was concerned, a technical problem persisted. A report on 'public address systems' published in the *Journal of Acoustic Engineering* in 1923 described the problem in the following way:

In the specific cases where the sound is reproduced in the same space or room in which it originates, another effect is encountered, which has generally been termed "singing", and is evidenced sufficiently great by the emission of a continuous note from the equipment.⁷

What is being described here is the phenomenon of feedback, a problem that was largely overcome by new developments in directional microphones in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when public address systems began to be installed in movie theatres and entertainment venues. However, the problem of feedback, although it can be kept in check by judicious placement of speakers and microphones (thus, it might be said, by someone who knows what they are doing), cannot be entirely eradicated. I still carry the vivid after-screach of certain eruptions of it, most notably from the occasion when a misbehaving microphone (rather ironically) disrupted my attempt to deliver a conference

⁶ Emily Thompson, 'Dead Rooms and Live Wires: Harvard, Hollywood, and the Deconstruction of Architectural Acoustics, 1900-1930', *Isis*, 88:4 (1997), 597-626 (p. 615).

⁷ I.W. Green and J.P. Maxfield, 'Public Address Systems', *Journal of the American Institute of Electrical Engineers*, 42 (1923), 347-348 (p. 347).

paper about Stewart Lee's style of delivery. Indeed, in a room in which a P.A. system is switched on, a sudden jab of feedback can be painful and even, in a low-level way, somewhat traumatic for those present, who are now alerted to the fact it might happen again, at any time. This perhaps explains the atmosphere of anticipation and even auspiciousness that can swirl around in a performance space in which a 'live' microphone is set-up and ready. The 'buzz in the air' is telling us that the microphone is 'on', alerts us to the possibility that, at any moment *something might happen*.

Steven Connor tells a complementary narrative about what might be named as a certain funny volatility of amplified air. According to this narrative, the cultural experience and meaning of silence changed with the invention of telephony and radio, towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the air became newly perceptible.

Where previously the air had been audible only in the relatively familiar and recognizable forms of the soughings and screeches of wind, electrification gave the air a new, more diffuse, unpredictable and illegible sonority.⁸

This newly electrified air is volatile: 'Users of telephones had for many years become inured to the annoyance of fizzing, crackling and other strange noises of electrical interference'.⁹ With the development of radio, a medium 'identified with the air through which it was for the most part transmitted', the 'vicissitudes of the air' were amplified even further, contributing to a new sense of the 'vulnerability of transmitted sound'. The newly electrified air is thus rendered newly audible: 'What came through *on* the air was the sound *of* the air, given voice by being given over to the electromagnetic carriage of voice.'¹⁰ Can this electrification of air can be thought of as a kind of thingification, in Brown's sense? When electrified, the air gains a potential for unexpected or sudden eruption (one that is literally 'disquieting'), a blockage or potential for malevolent

⁸ Steven Connor, 'Atmospherics', in *Sonic Meditations: Body, Sound, Technology* ed. by Carolyn Birdsall and Anthony Enns (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), pp. 159-74, (p. 161)

⁹ Connor, 'Atmospherics', p. 160.

¹⁰ Connor, 'Atmospherics', pp. 160-161.

sabotage, the air newly *asserts itself*. The popularization of radio and telephony made a certain kind of silence newly audible – made it palpable, buzzy – made a 'thing' of it. Might this have something to do with the curious sort of stage presence – the buzz, if you like – that it is possible for microphones *themselves* to emit, as *things*? Against the backdrop of this thingly silence, I will now turn my attention to the main event, the performance itself, the performance that begins with the microphone.

2. *I Cenci/Spettacolo*

It begins like this. Lights come up on a bare stage. Bare, that is, apart from a microphone on a stand. There is music playing, loud. A pumping track with synth that soon becomes recognizable as a version of Rod Stewart's *Da Ya Think I'm Sexy?* The stage lights come up, bright, and the microphone casts a shadow on the floor. And then lights go down, down to nothing – a black out. The music continues to play. Then, almost immediately, up come the lights again, on the same stage, the same microphone. It stands there still, on its stand, midway up the stage, slightly to the right (our left). The floor is made of grey linoleum, the kind of flooring that comes in rolls and gaffer-taped down at the edges. We're looking down at it, an area of floor marked off as a stage, surrounded on three sides by black drapes. Looking, and looking again, as the lights go up, and then change, and then change again, and then fade, and then come up again and repeat. The lights will continue to change in this same pattern throughout the whole show. We don't know that yet. For now, we are looking down onto this stage-floor. Looking, and looking again, as the lights go up on the stage, and then change, and then change again, and then fade, and then come up again lighting the stage, the grey linoleum floor, the curtains around three sides, the microphone.

If there is something recognizable about this scene, then we might consider what assumptions have already been made about what is about to happen. It might be said that, at the very least, the microphone, on its own there on the stage, creates the expectation of a greeting – some kind of acknowledgement

of our shared presence, some kind of introduction, explanation, something that might help us to understand why, exactly, we are here. What else is it that we, the audience for this performance of *I Cenci/Spettacolo* might be expecting to see, as the lights go down and the show is about to start? The first part of the show's title is a reference to Antonin Artaud's play of 1935, *The Cenci*. The second part of the title, 'spettacolo,' is an Italian word meaning 'show', and in Italy is widely used to refer to a theatrical production. For an English speaker, the word also sounds like 'spectacular,' which seems to be a promise of a bit more than just a 'show'. Putting Artaud aside for now, it could be said that, in this, its opening minute (we're still less than a minute in, remember), *I Cenci/Spettacolo* is making a show of its showness. That is, allowing the stage set-up itself to perform.

And there's something very exacting about this set-up. Indeed, in the book *Kinkaleri* published in 2008, the arrangement is described with a precision bordering on the pedantic. Here, after I watched the show, I read that the stage floor consisted in five pieces of grey linoleum, taped lengthways, and that the perimeter of the stage was twelve by ten meters, the drapes black velvet, five meters high, and that the particular microphone I was looking at was a Shure Sm 58, mounted on a steel stand.¹¹ There's lovingness, too, in this care taken over the basic elements of the show. Or perhaps something that is even slightly erotic. Perhaps I say this because of that Rod Stewart number, the voice singing 'sugar... sugar', as the lights go up, and change, and fade, and we look at the stage with the microphone, and the voice goes 'If you want my body and you think I'm sexy / Come on honey, tell me so'. It might be this combination of pedantry and eroticism that I found so funny. In one sense, the opening says 'this is what's here, these are the necessary elements, this is what we have', in another, it says 'If you really need me, just reach out and touch me / Come on sugar, let me know', played unabashedly loud, showing us what the P.A. system is capable of.

If there's something familiar about this scene, it's maybe due to the fact that the

¹¹ Kinkaleri, *2001-2008: La Scena Esausta* (Milan: Ubulibri, 2008), p. 80.

microphone seems to belong here, on a stage like this. That is, the stage that is set-up in the kind of room that, since the mid-twentieth century, has increasingly offered a low-cost, smaller-capacity and flexible alternative to main-stage auditoria – the ‘studio theatre’, or a ‘black-box studio theatre’.¹² The microphone seems like it belongs on this kind of stage, in this kind of room – literally, a mic and a stand is a piece of kit that, in most cases, is provided by and thus belongs to the venue in which the performance is taking place. In the twenty-first century, microphones, mic-stands and P.A. systems are part of the ‘tech set-up’ of any place that is in the business of putting on gigs or shows. In such spaces – the more intimate, black-box configurations – it is usual for audience members to see the stage, set-up and ready, before the show begins, perhaps as you walk up the steps of a moveable seating bank, the kind that creaks a little as you step onto it, and find your way to an unreserved seat. And, in such situations, as you settle into your seats, chatting a little, looking towards the stage, it is not unusual to see a microphone there, waiting and ready, as part of the tech-set up, the pre-set.

I Cenci/Spettacolo, as it goes on, will stage a number of images, encounters between objects and bodies, a series of smaller performance actions within the performance, each one taking up a given amount of time and space, some performed by humans, some by objects. What it will *not* stage, or not *quite* stage, is that which we may have been led to expect, and anticipate, by the fact of the microphone on the otherwise empty stage: speech. A greeting, for example. A ‘Good evening and thanks for coming’. An acknowledgement of our shared presence, of what it is we are doing here. The bodies that appear on this stage will not give themselves over to speech, and least not easily. Lights come up again, Shure 58 microphone casts shadow, eyes adjust, lights change, intensify and then, we see, we start to see now, something – some *thing* – is coming on. Yes, some thing is emerging from the curtains at the back of the stage, edging out sideways. It is a floral duvet-cover, a bedspread, sort of walking. Here it comes. There is someone inside it, because the thing is human-

¹² See Christopher Baugh, *Theatre, Performance and Technology*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 165.

sized, but rectangular, and it's vertical, but baggy. It wafts a little as it walks. Here it comes, advancing downstage in a straight line, and its movement is tentative but also sort of flouncy – because of the floral pattern, and the wafting. The music is loud, pumping, and speaks of seduction, desire. But the duvet-person/person-duvet doesn't prance or slink or glide so much as creep, wonkily, tentatively. Corner-by-corner it makes its slow and ridiculous advance. As it passes by the microphone, the lights change, subtly, a sort of pinkness intensifying, and the duvet reaches the front of the stage, where it begins to collapse. Not quickly, though; it collapses *slowly*, folds over on itself, as though the life went out of it *deliberately*. And then stillness.

A pause. We don't yet know, but we already have an inkling that the performance will continue, for at least the next forty or so minutes, to defer that greeting, that direct acknowledgement of our presence, that the microphone might have led us to expect. Instead, it will test a set of relationships between the various things at its disposal – relations between onstage and off, between people and things, between sounds and images. A chair, for example, seems to perform its action of sitting there, occupying its position, just as deliberately as the man who spends some minutes balancing, with his feet on two wine glasses. The human performers carry out many of their actions with an expressionless demeanor that could be described as 'deadpan', as if to remind us that everything on the stage performs, everything is intentional, and at the same time, *nothing* is performing, at least not more than anything else. It all just has to happen, will happen, while we watch. Things and people going on and off stage. Being shown, or showing themselves. And then going, being taken away, or taking themselves away. A tape-deck trailing a wire plays Tchaikovsky while a bare-chested, masked man 'wrestles', showily, with a tiger skin rug. A woman who sits, with her back to us, on a grey plastic chair, and then gets up and quietly leaves (but not before taping a sign to its back: I'LL BE BACK IN A MINUTE). A red-upholstered office chair, on wheels, pushed on from the wings, spinning momentarily on its swiveling wheels.

There is a tension being played out, it seems, between the showy and the unshowy, between effort and refusal. There is a moment at which whatever it

was that was going on onstage ceases, peters out, and in the ensuing silence the man 'levitating' atop his wine glasses audibly exhales (I didn't realize he was holding his breath). There is a moment at which the woman with her back to us presses STOP on the tape deck and we hear, from the wings, the sound of sawing, a sound that continues for some seconds, during which everything onstage is still, silent. The woman sits. The sawing reaches a crescendo, and then stops. And then a crash. Wood falling to the floor. Another silence. Two things, thrown on from the wings, arc across the stage and fall with a clatter: chair legs.

There's an element of 'noises off', a specifically theatrical kind of funniness. Something or someone, behind a curtain, is sabotaging the show. The funniness at play in these moments had to do with sound and space, the relationship between onstage and offstage, and how the space of the room and the space of the stage were being rendered audible, or, it seems, drowned out. Put on mute.

For the first forty or so minutes none of the performers addresses the audience directly, although there are two moments at which a man steps up to the microphone. The first time, a masked man yells into it as he beats his bare chest. The second man, in jeans and T-shirt, delivers something vaguely identifiable as a 'speech'. That is, he makes the gestures and the sounds of great oratory, making sounds phonetically *like* English, specifically a Southern American drawl (perhaps an imitation of then-US President George W. Bush), with all the intonation of speech. It's just that nothing he says actually 'says' anything: it's just a sound.

And it is perhaps this play of amplified and non-amplified, the sense of something deliberately withheld, that made one particular moment especially funny to me: when the microphone was moved, its channel was left on, or 'live', so that the microphone picked up the clunky sound of itself and its stand being picked up and plonked down. This happened more than once, and the performer on each occasion was expressionless, whereas, it seemed, the microphone was all-too expressive, 'live'. What became audible was the sound

of the stage thing amplifying itself, demanding our attention, reminding us that, on this stage, everything apart from speech seems to be taking place.

Thus, in *I Cenci*, there are various borderlines between played across: barriers between languages, barriers between language and not-language, a division between performers and technicians, between actions that seem adeptly 'professional' and those that seem almost willfully unprofessional, and there is a play between the rituals associated with a theatrical stage, and the deadpan insistence that this is, after all just a room.

3. Turn-of-the-century gigness

Having basked, somewhat, in its afterglow, I now feel it incumbent upon me to attempt to locate *I Cenci/Spettacolo*'s peculiarly funny theatricalism, and my response to it, in its discursive context. Certain of Joe Kelleher's insights as to Kinkaleri's work, in his book *The Illuminated Theatre*, has proven invaluable to my efforts here. In his discussion of Kinkaleri's subsequent work *Nerone* (2006), Joe Kelleher suggests that what he calls 'the basic "black box" configuration of latter-day studio or laboratory theatre,' is a key determining factor in the kind of work that Kinkaleri make. This kind of space, 'low-cost, unadorned, flexible, the sort of space where anything that happens can mutate into something else'¹³ has a lot to do with what goes on in *I Cenci/Spettacolo* – the pace, the rhythm, the expectations and surprises, the acoustics and the materials, the things going on and off, the *stuff* – we might say, the stuff they get away with. Kelleher writes, too, about *I Cenci/Spettacolo*, or rather about a fifteen-minute 'study', performed some time in 2003, featuring material that would form part of the full-length version that premiered the following year. Material that included, it should be said, a 'performer conducting some business for several minutes with a standing electric fan and a microphone'.¹⁴ In light of the show's title, with its allusion to Artaud, that 'modernist theatre iconoclast,' whose writings of the

¹³ Joe Kelleher, *The Illuminated Theatre: Studies on the Suffering of Images* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 61.

¹⁴ Kelleher, p. 65.

1930s 'set out an agenda of fundamental challenges to the expectations, the satisfactions, indeed the very means and function of theatrical representation as such', Kelleher wonders whether Kinkaleri are offering some sort of 'reflection upon the state of theatrical representation today'. And indeed, Kelleher finds something of this in the fifteen-minute sketch, although admits it made him bemused and befuddled, although, he writes, 'it did make me want to laugh'.¹⁵

Kelleher describes his interpretive response to the piece as one of recognition. Yes, perhaps something not altogether un-Artaudian, he allows, albeit 'with the high modernist temperature turned down somewhat'. But, more acutely,

what I felt the company was up to had less to do with reading back to modernist theatre than it did with another level of recognition, an association with contemporaneous theatre and performance practices I'd encountered or become aware of in London and other European cities (and also in the USA), through the 1990s and after.¹⁶

Kelleher describes this world as one of a 'latter-day "experimental" theatre', thus offering a vague and yet familiar denominator of the kind of thing you might see in a black-box theatre studio. The kind of thing you might expect to see at festivals like the KunstenFESTIVALdesarts in Brussels, where *I Cenci* premiered in 2004. For the moment, I am less concerned here with terminology than with the way Kelleher characterises this kind of theatre. 'It was work' he writes, 'to take just one particular trope – that often involved performers standing at microphones, proffering an intimacy, although not an intimacy "for" anyone in particular'.¹⁷ My ears prick up at this mention of the microphone: it feels significant, in the context of my own work in this chapter, that when seeking to characterize what he called 'the new work – the postmodern work, the postdramatic work or however we are learning to call it', Kelleher reaches for the image of performers standing at microphones. Geographically dispersed as it appears to be (found in London, Europe and the USA), according to Kelleher, during a certain period of time (the 1990s and after) a kind of theatre

¹⁵ Kelleher, p. 65.

¹⁶ Kelleher, pp. 65-6.

¹⁷ Kelleher, p. 66.

became recognizable for a dramaturgy in which the microphone is instrumental.

Claire MacDonald defines dramaturgy as 'a kinetic and time-based practice, a material process in movement, that both frames *and* takes place in the moment of performance'.¹⁸ Kelleher's discussion of Kinkaleri arranges itself around the theme of 'recognition', tracing its origins as a 'philosophical legend' to Hegel. Outside of, or perhaps in tandem with, its properly philosophical meaning, which I will not attempt to capture on these pages, there is something useful, suggestive, about the word 'recognition'. As Kelleher suggests, recognition plays a large part in theatrical sense-making, or dramaturgy, which, as MacDonald reminds us is an activity undertaken by both the makers and spectators of a work of performance, 'attending to the many dimensions of making and making sense'.¹⁹ Questions around recognition are relevant particularly, perhaps, to the kind of dramaturgy we're considering here, that which may be called not only 'postmodern', 'postdramatic', or 'experimental', but *devised* too, suggesting the show gathered together out of bits, turns or, to reference the famous book by Tim Etchells, 'certain fragments'.²⁰ And, as I'll go on to discuss, recognition also has a lot to do with what you find funny. I think in a complicated way.

As artistic director of Forced Entertainment, who are widely cited as leading exponents of this kind of work, Etchells is not incidental to this historical genealogy, this narrative. And Forced Entertainment are serial microphone-users, from *Club of No Regrets* (1993) to *The Thrill of it All* (2010), many of the company's most defining and influential works have revolved in some way around a microphone, or several. In their work, the microphone is not only an aesthetic choice, but a practical tool. It offers both position and gesture: standing at the mic, passing the mic, holding the mic in front of another performer in an interview set-up, commentating on or providing a 'voice-over' to what other performers are doing. The microphone thus plays an active role in

¹⁸ Claire MacDonald, 'Conducting the Flow: Dramaturgy and Writing', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 30:1 (2010), 91-100 (pp. 94-5).

¹⁹ MacDonald, p. 95.

²⁰ Tim Etchells, *Certain Fragments: Contemporary Performance and Forced Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1999).

the process by which much theatre, or performance, of this kind is created; 'devising,' is a process whereby, often – not always, but often – the things that the individual performers are doing onstage are things that they themselves have offered, invented, improvised, tried out, during the process of working out the show. And, as Kelleher notes, the microphone functions as a 'stage in itself': mounted on a stand, the microphone becomes a place, a position. Just as it stands *on* a stage, it inaugurates the ground on which it stands as a stage: and this stage-within-a-stage orients the action that occurs around, behind, and in front of it. And so, it can be said that a microphone-oriented dramaturgy is one that makes the location for not one unified action or representation, but a number of separate and even self-contained performances or 'turns' that may overlap, compete with, or succeed one another.

4. If you don't laugh

For the purposes of the current discussion, let us settle on the term 'postmodern theatre' as a descriptor for the 'new' work, so-called, now not so new. In Kelleher's text, postmodern theatre is identified first via a trope, now an emblem.

If a lasting emblem of modernist theatricality had been Artaud's famous image of the actor as a sacrificial victim burning at the stake and signaling through the flames, an exemplum of this later turn-of-the-century work was the more pedestrian image of a hired actor in a gorilla costume, standing in a theatre foyer – in a foyer, mind you, not on a stage – with a sign around their neck that read "If you don't laugh I don't get paid."²¹

A trope, an emblem. Two kinds of figures, both embodied *by* figures. We can think of the trope of performers standing at microphones as inhering within the theatrical work, whereas the emblem of the jobbing gorilla stands outside it, literally, in the foyer. The jobbing gorilla is emblematic of the condition of the work in general. In both cases though, we have a figure that stands. And, in

²¹ Kelleher, p. 66.

both cases a speech act is happening, but in neither case does this speech become audible to us, the readers. The microphone amplifies 'an intimacy', 'a form of obligation', but we do not hear what that says. On the other hand, we 'hear' what the gorilla has to say for itself, but of course, amidst the bustle of the foyer, this figure is conspicuously silent.

Of course, it is possible to give the gorilla back its story, if not (at least within the bounds of my current discussion) its voice, as it was Forced Entertainment who staged this tableau in the foyer of Mousonturm in Frankfurt, in November 2003.²² The following year, the gorilla costume was donned by Claire Marshall onstage in *Bloody Mess*, the show that marked the company's twentieth anniversary, and that premiered at KunstenFESTIVALdesarts on 7 May 2004, which – in a coincidence the significance of which will become clearer as I explain my own connection with this work – was the day before *I Cenci/Spettacolo* premiered in the same city, at the same festival (albeit in a smaller room).

I think about the gorilla's exhortation: "If you don't laugh..." which, although it might be 'funny' in some sense, is not necessarily conducive to laughter, not in the satisfying, cathartic, whole-room-laughing way that we might associate with comedy proper. Hence, perhaps, Kelleher's emphasis on the location of this living statue: 'in a foyer, mind you, not on a stage'. A foyer is a place of passage, and of chit-chat, not the sealed-in, atmospheric hush of the theatre-room. A foyer is place where tickets are sold, drinks bought, posters displayed: a place of commerce, then, both social and monetary. And I have to admit at this point to the circumstances of my spectatorship. I was never in a theatre, or even in a foyer outside a theatre in which *I Cenci/Spettacolo* was taking place. I watched it on DVD, in London, in 2015. I watched it in a different sort of room, a domestic one: my living room. And I watched it on my own. I wonder how this relates to what I experienced as the unbearable funniness of *I Cenci/Spettacolo*, which made me feel like I *wanted* to laugh, but not out loud.

²² Kelleher, p. 77.

5. Who and what

Perhaps because of the circumstances of my spectatorship, perhaps because of the nature of the piece, I did not identify with those onstage as individuals. With no prior knowledge of the company or their personnel, I did not recognize faces, and had no sense of whether the bodies on stage were co-authors, regular members of the company, or hired in actors. Indeed, after my first viewing, I didn't even have a clear sense of how many performers were involved. According to the production notes, which I consult afterwards, onstage I saw two men and one woman: Luca Camiletti, Marco Mazzoni and Christina Rizzo. They share credit for directing, scenography and costume with three others: Matteo Bambi, Massimo Conti and Gina Monaco.²³ But I did not know those names at the time of my viewing. Really, I should have at least remembered that the woman was called Christina: the man with the microphone introduced her, saying 'Beside me, Christina'. This man, barechested but unmasked, also attempts to introduce Luca. 'Luca', he says. A pause. 'Luca? Can you come up onstage please?' Nothing happens. 'Well, alright', he says, 'let me keep going'. With my new found knowledge of the show's personnel, I realise the joke here is that Luca, the only other performer, is providing the real-time translation from offstage. Towards the end of the show, the man I now identify, rightly or wrongly, as Marco repeatedly asks us (or rather, *them*, those who *were* in the theatre that night): 'Do you want me to do the scene of the fakir?' No response. Again he asks: 'Yes or no?' A few lacklustre 'no's' from the dark. 'The ones who said no can leave and then I'll do the scene.' They are notable, these two bits, for being the most visibly agitated any of the performers get all night. Notable too, perhaps, for being the parts of the show I failed to remember so clearly after my first viewing. Perhaps I attended less to these parts because this kind of this is almost *too* familiar: performers introducing themselves, and one another, using their real names. This kind of work is full of 'Gregg and Gary' and 'Terry and Cathy and Claire', as are many of the scholarly responses to such work. And perhaps the prevalence of first-name-terms spectatorship in this era is another reason to hold onto the way I saw, upon first

²³ Kinkaleri, *La Scena Esausta*, p. 80.

viewing, not individuals but the impersonality of these bodies, moving, going on and off, bringing things and taking them away.

Not that I mean to claim that my non-identification with the individual persons of the piece, my inability to recognize them by face or name affords me a such a thing as 'critical distance'; on the contrary, I think my distance from the individuals onstage goes some way to explain the intense, almost delirious feelings of delight I experienced, watching the DVD there in my living room. The particular kind of funniness I'm describing is bound up with my having feelings for and about *the piece itself*, what *it* was doing. And what I felt for *it* was something, at the time, I felt moved to describe, and declare, as love. Watching from my sofa, alone in a room in 2015, I was thinking, over and over again, 'I love this'.

That I named the feeling as 'love' may well have something to do with the way that, at some point, beyond the half way point, the words 'I LOVE YOU' are spelled out in capital letters on the stage floor, in some sort of tape. Masking tape, it looks like. It's during the speech, by which I mean, the 'speech', the incomprehensible oration. As it reaches its crescendo, the man at the mic nearly shouting, his arm aloft, finger pointing skywards, a second man enters and, with deft and decisive movements, begins taping the letters across the front of the stage: 'I LOVE Y...' emblazoned in impressively neat copperplate lettering, the sound of the tape continuing as the lights fade out, and then back. The man did this much as a technician would mark the position of a microphone, a summary, businesslike taping task, the clichéd phrase emerging from his movements became obvious long before it was finished. 'I LOVE YOU'; a cliché that sometimes speaks the truth.

I think again of Kelleher's reference to performers 'proffering an intimacy, although not an intimacy "for" anyone in particular',²⁴ which rather prompts the question, who is being addressed with *these* words, these written words? Who are they "for"? Could it be that I, watching *I Cenci/Spettacolo* on my own in my

²⁴ Kelleher, p. 66.

room, had the feeling that, with these words, the piece was in some sense addressing me, personally, me who was *not* there? And, indeed, the specifically theatrical funniness of this show teases at a feeling of something that is hidden, and it sets in play an uncertainty as to who, or what is, waiting there. What is going on in the wings, under the floor, beyond the edge of the stage? Who is *behind* these operations?

Who is behind it? Who is doing it? These are dramaturgical questions, perhaps ontological ones too. And they open onto questions about the division of labour: who is doing this work? Who is behind it? Who is visible, and who, or what is *not* visible, and yet *there*? For example, who is making the lights so incessantly go up, change, change again, and go down? Is it the technician, sitting behind us (I mean them, the audience who were there in 2004, not me, there in my house in 2015) in the 'box', the one employed, in the parlance of the theatre, to 'operate'? At a certain point in my viewing of *I Cenci*, when it became clear to me that these lighting changes were going to continue throughout the entire piece, a part of my brain was making a calculation as to how and why this decision might have been made, imagining the conversation the company might have had with the theatre's in-house technician, how they might have tried to explain what they wanted, even produced a ridiculously extensive cue-sheet. That thought amused me, at first, but then I imagined the technician getting stressed out – pissed off, perhaps, or else anxious to do it right, which seemed worse, and so I allowed myself to conclude that the lighting changes were not manual, but automated. Yes, the cues would have been programmed into the lighting board in advance, I thought, during the get-in, when there was time, perhaps over a coffee. Because, I was thinking, there is no way this many cues could be plotted and timed precisely. The fades-to-black and cross-fades and fade-ups had nothing more than a chance relation to the action onstage. Yes, I was satisfied with this, the conclusion that no one was *doing* the lighting changes – not the hand of the technician acting under instructions, not the artistic intentions of whoever made those sorts of decisions saying 'yes, precisely now, just as the man in the mask walks up to the microphone'. Later, I discovered that, in fact, it was company member Matteo Bambi operating the lights during the performance. And, although their arrangement was formulaic

(twelve floodlights arranged above the playing space in a circle, like a clock, set up and focused according to Kinkaleri's plan), the sequence of the lighting changes was not. Kinkaleri's production notes have this to say: 'L'accensione di uno più fari è casual, la loro rotazione non sembra seguire regole precise.'²⁵ When I show this sentence to Giuseppe, my neighbour, who is Italian, he tells me that it means, in essence, that the sequence of the lights doesn't seem to be following any rules. It 'is more or less casual'. And so what I interpreted as programmed was, in fact, manual. But it was not done with the heavy sounding 'dramaturgical' intention I at times felt. It was *casual*.

Curious then, that I had interpreted this casualness as programmatic. Certainly, in spite of believing that no one was *doing* the lighting, that the relation between lighting state and onstage action was purely arbitrary, as I watched, I kept feeling as though I had been caught out. Little doubts emerged. In certain of the lighting changes, the crossfades or blackouts, the transitions or 'cues', there was such a feeling of dramaturgical *intention*. Even though I had consciously registered, accepted as a fact, that the lighting's combination with the other elements was purely random, my senses – my sense of what was happening – kept telling me otherwise, even just momentarily. This happened throughout the piece. It felt, deliciously, like I was being tricked, and tricked again, into *feeling something*. Perhaps this explains my feeling of being held in some sort of continuous state of suspense. Perhaps it explains why there was something almost erotic in my relation to the show. I felt as though I was being enticed, and then held back, pulled in by the show's atmospherics, and then thrown out again, back onto my sofa.

'I LOVE YOU' is emblazoned, irreversibly, as it seems to me on the grey linoleum floor. Knowing the way things work on these kinds of stages, I know that the stuff that amasses gradually throughout the show tends to stay there, and anyway it'll take too long to peel this off, and although the pace of the piece is slow, I don't believe they'll attempt such a messy action in front of an audience; that's surely a job for after the show is over. This reminds me that

²⁵ Kinkaleri, *La Scena Esausta*, p. 89.

these attendances to the space, the stuff, the equipment of the space, are usually within the remit of the technician, and usually happen when it is not in theatrical mode of stage/audience but when, lit up by those lights they call 'workers', it is exposed and inhabited as just a room, a literal room with four walls and a ceiling and a floor. But then, towards the end of the show, the man reappears with a roll of flooring, the same grey linoleum that covers the stage. Businesslike as ever, he places it down and, with a small kick, unrolls it, all at once the 'I LOVE YOU' is gone. With this gesture, floor is no longer ignorable (if it ever was) as some neutral 'ground' for the figures 'written' when the bodies and things move across it - it's revealed to be *flooring*, a portable and temporary covering, just another of the theatrical apparatus being corralled into meaningful action. As though the things in and of and belonging to the theatre, or the thing of theatre itself, were acting this out. As though the stage itself were now being recruited to join in the game of showing and hiding, tantalising us with possible explanations and then, quite casually, taking them away.

6. LOVING the floor

Perhaps it is time for me to acknowledge that I used to spend a lot of time in rooms like this, or at least engaged in activities that had this kind of black box studio theatre in mind. My feelings of recognition had to do with knowing how it feels to be not only in the room, but in the show. I mean, how it feels to put your hands or knees or even your face against that particular kind of linoleum floor covering, and also how it feels to devise and improvise and pull a show together as it, the show-thing, resists, pushes back at you in various frustrating and bewildering ways. So perhaps the love and the almost unbearable funniness I'm describing have something to do with a kind of longing or physical desire for the *thing* of theatre, I mean, the feeling of being in it, the physical grappling with its materials. And perhaps this is connected to a sort of professional longing, not only for a past in which the career to which I aspired was still, potentially, in the future, but also a yearning to, once again, be someone who does something not only with words, but with *things*. I mean, things you can physically pick up and put down again.

And is it possible to historicise this set of feelings? If so, the process would be one that would have to acknowledge the entanglement of personal with the professional, the economic with the autobiographical. I'm aware of how embarrassing it can be when someone goes misty eyed and starts recounting episodes from 'life in the theatre', so I will keep this brief. I will also revert to using the first-person plural, although this time the 'we' is not an imagined gathering but an actual collaboration. Not wishing to write an official history, I will not name names, but I will give dates.

In 2004, we went in a car over to Brussels to the KunstenFESTIVALdesarts to see the premiere of *Bloody Mess*. It was in the Kaaitheater on 7 May 2004, at 8.30pm. As previously mentioned, the premiere of Kinkaleri's *I Cenci/Spettacolo* occurred in the same city, at the same festival, the following evening, at 6pm, in the Théâtre 140. But we did not see it. As you now know, I didn't watch *I Cenci/Spettacolo* until eleven years later, and then on DVD, at which point I think not only 'I love this', but '*we would have loved this*', although the 'we' in question no longer exists, at least, not in that way. What does remain, however, is the fact that, two years later, at the start of 2006, we flew from London to Berlin, on Ryanair, with a brick in a suitcase.

To understand why and how this came about, it is necessary to go back to the previous decade. In 1992 the sculptor Cornelia Parker made an installation called 'Neither From Nor Towards' using around one hundred bricks, in various states of erosion, picked up from the beach beside the White Cliffs of Dover.²⁶ Midway through 2006, having seen an image of this work,²⁷ we went to Dover. At the time we were trying to find material for a performance, trying to think like artists. At Dover, we found the coastline was still littered with the sea-smoothed bricks just like those Parker had used. We took one as an unexpected souvenir.

I now think of the brick as a kind of fan fiction Macguffin. How it ended up in the

²⁶ Cornelia Parker, *Neither From Nor Towards*, 1992, bricks and wire, 250 x 250 x 400cm, Arts Council Collection.

²⁷ See, for example, Cornelia Parker, *Avoided Object* (Cardiff: Chapter, 1996), p. 4.

show I cannot quite remember, but it did. And so when we got our first proper gig, in Berlin, we booked a flight and packed the brick. This was 2006 early in the budget airline's history, before the implementation of its famously punitive luggage policy. Nevertheless, we incurred a significant excess baggage fee. Feeling invested in the performance, we paid. Now we had the brick, the story of the brick, and the joke of the brick. Not only did the brick have a backstory, but the backstory had a punchline. We would introduce the brick, and the brick would introduce us by giving us an occasion for the kind of self deprecating 'British humour' that went down well on the European festival circuit in the early years of the 21st Century.

Set down here, the brick is a decoy, of sorts. But I will return to it.

7. *American Idol*

There is a sculpture by the American artist Rachel Harrison from 2008, around the same time as *I Cenci* and the brick, called *American Idol*.²⁸ In this work, we see another microphone stand, another microphone. This time, though, it is set up not onstage in a black box theatre studio, but in another sort of room, but an art gallery, the so-called 'white cube'. As well as the stand-mounted mic, there is a block, a monolith. A wonky, rough-edged thing standing upright, roughly the size and height of a person. The mic-stand is set up in front of it, at a slight angle, so that the monolith appears to be stepping up to the mic, or else stepping back from it. The piece is called *American Idol*; a performance of some sort is being intimated, but also deferred, or refused. After all, the microphone is unplugged, conspicuously so, the wire snaking off to nowhere.

Harrison's sculptural works usually consist of several contrasting elements arranged in tension with one another. More often than not, one of these elements will be a monolith of sorts, a rough-edged thing. The one we see in *American Idol* is, according to the accompanying list of materials, made of

²⁸ Rachel Harrison, *American Idol*, 2008, wood, polystyrene, cement, Parex, acrylic, microphone with stand, 62 x 24 x 89cm, Greene Naftali, New York.

'wood, polystyrene, cement, Parex, acrylic' ('microphone with stand' is also included in this list). It looks like it has been knocked-together out of roughly hacked bits of wood or polystyrene, plastered, and then given a somewhat unceremonious paint job: tentative areas of yellow, purple, turquoise, a big spatter of what looks like gold around its middle.

Writing in *Frieze*, Jennifer Allen refers to the tension within Harrison's work as that between 'the mute, Modernist, hand-sculpted form and the chatty, mass-produced commodity'.²⁹ You could see *American Idol* as a joke precisely on the perceived muteness of the modernist hand-sculpted form, the ascetic whiteness of its grainy surfaces splashed showily with paint, as though it were desperately trying to win votes as a contestant on the eponymous TV show.

The critic John Kelsey writes that, although in the contemporary art world, Harrison is known as a 'sculptor' (from the Latin *sculptere*, to scratch or carve), she 'does not cast or carve but in several senses, *set up* her works: erect, of course, but also establish, plan, and maybe even trick them into situations where they will be caught or blamed'.³⁰ He suggests therefore, that a more productive way of referring to her works is as 'statues'; statue comes from the Latin *status*, position and *statuere*, to set up. A position and a set-up – the latter term is almost synonymous with 'assemblage', but not quite, as 'set-up' implies more strongly the work of a human agent, 'set-up' for some purpose (for example, for the purpose of a stand-up comedy performance). Of course, a joke might be said to have a 'set-up', or indeed, a joke can *be* a set-up: you can set something up for a fall. And of course, in the sphere of performance, the 'tech set-up' is the time and arrangement that so often revolves around a microphone.

The funny tension at play in *American Idol* is enhanced by the way the monolith is set a little back from the mic, at a forty-five degree angle, creating the curious impression of reluctance, shyness, modesty. A set of exchanges, then, between

²⁹ Jennifer Allen, 'Moving Targets', *Frieze*, 110 (October 2007), 232 – 237 (p. 234).

³⁰ John Kelsey, 'Sculpture in an Abandoned Field', in *Rachel Harrison: If I Did It*, ed. by Heike Munder and Ellen Seiferman (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2007), pp. 120-125 (p. 120).

extroversion and reticence, expressiveness and stolidity. What, if anything, can this sculpture tell us about the microphone as a theatrical thing? And how might an appreciation of the particular *performance* of this work open onto a discussion of what I found so (*not*-laugh-out-loud) funny about Kinkaleri's take on postmodern theatricality?

Critics frequently describe Harrison's work as 'theatrical' or having a quality of 'performance', and when they do so, they often name check Michael Fried. Fried is the art critic who wrote 'Art and Objecthood', a famous essay that is still frequently quoted and that, for many years after its initial publication, in *Artforum* in 1967,³¹ influenced the terms in which certain types of art and theatre (and the relationship between the two) were discussed. In particular, as both Shannon Jackson and Nicholas Ridout have suggested, Fried's essay represents an influential moment in 'the emergence of "theatricality" as a key (and negative) term in the understanding of certain post-modern arts practices'.³² In the following pages, I will use the example of Harrison's work to open Fried's essay to a reading that, in turn, opens onto Kinkaleri's *Cenci/Spettacolo*. In the process I hope to animate a set of exchanges between theatrical and sculptural funniness. In order to do this, it will become necessary to enjoy the funny affective quality of each – that is, the way I feel like I want to laugh not only when I watch Kinkaleri's performance and look at Harrison's sculpture, but also when I read and think about Fried's essay.

8. Literalism and theatricality

In 'Art and Objecthood' Fried advances a strident critique, indeed condemnation, of a certain strain of Minimalist art he calls 'literalist', which he seeks to distinguish from the artwork he most esteems, namely Abstract Expressionist painting. He takes the work and statements of Donald Judd and

³¹ Reprinted in Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 148-172.

³² Ridout, Nicholas, *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), p. 5.

Robert Morris as exemplary of the sensibility he has disparagingly called 'literalist' on the basis that these sculptors had become concerned, above all else, with the material fact of their work – its overall shape, its objecthood, its presence in a room in which the viewer is also present. He cites Morris' statement about an art that 'takes relations out of the work and makes them functions of space, light, and the viewer's field of vision', and of 'one's awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work'.³³ In Fried's view, the defining aim of modernist painting (and thus art in general) was its attempt to 'defeat or suspend its own objecthood'.³⁴ The modernist painting must be autonomous, self-contained, and thus 'compel conviction' as a work of art. In so doing, it might afford a viewer the opportunity to become 'absorbed' in the work. Fried is espousing a work of aesthetic autonomy, an artwork that holds its own. And the way that Fried condemns the so-called literalist work's failure to achieve (or even strive toward) this aesthetic autonomy is by calling it 'theatrical'. And he wields this term of disparagement with all the emphasis he can muster. He writes, 'the imperative that modernist painting defeat or suspend its objecthood is at bottom the imperative *that it defeat or suspend theatre*'.³⁵

It would be easy for a theatre practitioner to take it rather personally that Fried uses the word 'theatrical' as an insult, especially when he writes statements like 'theatre is now the negation of art'.³⁶ But, for a long time, for *this* theatre practitioner, feeling mildly indignant at Fried's famously intemperate tone was overshadowed by a feeling of incomprehension. It seemed to make no sense that Fried would deploy the word in this context. When people use the word 'theatrical' as a term of disparagement, they usually mean in some sense conspicuously fake, perhaps even histrionic. Along with this comes images of a rather stuffy, silly building, with footlights and velvet curtains, and scenery lowered from mechanical pulleys, and actors with powdered faces pretending to be other people. Whereas Fried uses the word 'theatrical' it to disparage

³³ Fried, p. 153.

³⁴ Fried, p. 151.

³⁵ Fried, p. 160, emphasis here, and in all citations from this edition, original.

³⁶ Fried, p. 153.

minimalist sculptures, which, with their stripped-bare aesthetic, would appear to embody the very opposite of theatre. The works of Morris and Judd from this period are geometric, plain, repetitive. Nothing representing anything else, the materials are just what they are, the shapes as plain as they could be.

It might be observed, though, that Fried is fully aware that by accusing the minimalists of theatricality, he is calling upon an unexpected term. He wields it with relish, this shocking accusation of *theatricality*, a term that Morris, Judd et al would not think of using about their own work and, arguably, a condition of which they would not be at all happy to hear their work accused. And so, with all the rhetorical emphasis he can muster, Fried is calling attention to what he perceives as a new and worrying trend: outbreaks of theatricality in the least expected places. The minimalists' 'literalist espousal of objecthood,' he writes, despite appearances to the contrary, 'amounts to nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theatre'.³⁷ It is important to acknowledge, at this point, that, as Philip Auslander notes, 'Fried is prejudiced against "theatricality" but not against theatre as such'.³⁸ He is diagnosing a trend that he dislikes within the art world, rather than dismissing the validity of all theatre as an artistic practice. Indeed, towards the end of his essay Fried acknowledges that the 'need to defeat what I have been calling theatre' has also been felt within the theatre itself – he cites 'of course' Brecht and Artaud. For Fried, the efforts of these two modernist theatre revolutionists are defined by their recognition of theatre's 'need to establish a drastically different relation to its audience'. It seems that *the audience* is a key part of the problem, if not *the* problem. He continues, 'For theatre *has* an audience – it *exists* for one – in a way the other arts do not; in fact, this more than anything else is what modernist sensibility finds intolerable in theatre generally'.³⁹ The dependence on the audience – this is 'intolerable' for modernism, an intellectual movement that prizes aesthetic autonomy. The neediness of theatre, its outwards projection, the sense in which it exists only *for* the audience.

³⁷ Fried, p. 153.

³⁸ Philip Auslander, *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 51.

³⁹ Fried, p. 163.

Fried's disdain for the minimalist sensibility had to do with its concern for 'the actual circumstances' in which the viewer encounters the work, 'the experience of literalist art is of an object in a situation – one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*'.⁴⁰ The italics here suggest that there is something that Fried finds really too much about this – the inclusion of the beholder in what Morris calls 'the entire situation',⁴¹ the situation that is itself *part* of the work, means that the sculpture *needs* a viewer in order to work. A 'theatrical' sculpture needs an audience in a way that Fried considers improper and even faintly embarrassing. Picking up my earlier discussion of postmodern theatre, I would like to push this analysis one step further and suggest that Fried's anti-theatrical sentiment can also be thought of as an expression of what Kelleher called 'modernism's perennial disdain towards the economic sphere'.⁴² For the condition of existing for an audience, that is needing an audience, depending on one, is tainted not only with a need for recognition but by an *economic* imperative – and this fatally compromises its aesthetic autonomy, as though the theatrical is that which says 'if you don't look at me, I don't get paid'. Or, perhaps, because it's an *art* object, it's saying something more like 'if you don't activate my objecthood I'm not worth anything – as art, or on the art market (for the two are now entangled)'.

At this point, we might remind ourselves of the conflation of modernism with muteness, of the critic's trope of 'the mute, Modernist, hand-sculpted form'. It seems that Fried, as a champion of Modernist work, would rather the art maintained its dignified and mysterious silence (or, you could say he would rather it let *him*, the modernist art critic, do the talking). Auslander suggests that with hindsight, we can understand that 'Fried was describing a sensibility overtaking the artworld', in other words, 'Fried's "theatricality" is what we now call "postmodernism"'.⁴³

It is worth noting that Fried's intemperately worded espousal of a particular sort

⁴⁰ Fried, p. 153.

⁴¹ Fried, p. 154.

⁴² Kelleher, p. 66.

⁴³ Auslander, 52.

of anti-theatrical prejudice became unexpectedly influential for attempts, within performance and theatre studies, to work out what this postmodernism meant for the theatre. Such accounts often shared Fried's disdain for theatricality, and instead searched for redemption in a kind of literalism, or anti-representationalism. But instead of dwelling upon this anti-theatrical turn in performance studies, I will instead turn to Nicholas Ridout's response to it in *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems* (2006). Ridout's work is useful for the current discussion for its working-through of the relationship between Fried's deployment of theatrical alongside literalist, and what might be called 'The Theatre,' by which I mean that place we often still imagine when someone says 'theatre', the grand building, the footlights, the curtains, the scenery and the actors pretending to be other people.

Ridout's key critical move is 'an identification of theatre with a certain kind of unease'.⁴⁴ He cites Fried's key argument, that 'Literalist sensibility is theatrical because [...] it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work [...] the experience of literalist art is of an object in a situation – one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*.'⁴⁵ Calling attention to Fried's italicization, Ridout observes that 'it is an awareness of one's body as a presence in a situation that seems to constitute the condition of theatricality in this argument'.⁴⁶ By this logic, what Fried frames as the 'overcoming of theatre' (which for him defines the aim of true art, of Modernist painting), depends upon the work's capacity to 'absorb the viewer, permit her a moment of self-transcendence in contemplation of the work'.⁴⁷ In this context, self-transcendence means forgetting oneself, momentarily forgetting one has a body, and that that body is part of a situation, a set of circumstances. For Ridout, the kind of beholder Fried is imagining getting absorbed in the modernist painting is 'all consciousness,' someone whose embodiedness has 'receded into the complete darkness of a non-existent auditorium the better to contemplate the wholly unsituated picture that is suddenly almost both subject

⁴⁴ Ridout, p. 7.

⁴⁵ Fried, p. 153.

⁴⁶ Ridout, p. 8.

⁴⁷ Ridout, p. 8.

and object of this act of contemplation of absorption'.⁴⁸ As Ridout's metaphorisation implies, this self-transcendence is not entirely antithetical to the aims of theatre as we know it. Indeed, he suggests the closest parallel to the absorption and aesthetic autonomy that Fried seeks in modernist painting is theatrical realism, a dramaturgical style that can be traced to the nineteenth-century playhouse and the naturalistic, 'fourth wall' theatre it staged. In other words, The Theatre, wherein the footlights, scenery, curtains associated with the Victorian playhouse need not literally be present for the conventions to work. These conventions are also, it must be said, dependent in large part on electricity. The introduction of electrical light meant not only that the stage could be bright, the auditorium dark, but that the lights could be ceremonially dimmed to signal the start of the show and draw focus to the brightly lit stage. As Ridout notes, theatrical realism operates according to the 'pictorial values of illusionism', which are 'sustained by conditions of spectatorship in which a darkened auditorium becomes the norm'. And, for Ridout, what theatrical realism and Fried's model of Modernist art share, is that they 'seek to eliminate the spectator from the set-up'.⁴⁹

Although its origins can be traced to the 19th Century, this set of expectations, and the pleasures attendant upon them – sitting in the darkened auditorium, watching the curtain rise on a brightly lit stage-picture, becoming absorbed in the goings-on onstage – have not themselves been consigned to history. Indeed, my own experience of theatregoing is often haunted by a yearning for a sort of disappearance into the absolute dark. As the lights fade out, and a quiet falls, I often find myself disappointed by the incompleteness of the blackout, compromised as it invariably is by exit signs and phone screens, and the fidgety unsilentness of those around me. However much I might try to be a good post-Cagean (in other words, postmodern) spectator, telling myself to accept these contingencies as part of the experience, part of the performance, because the entire situation *is the work*, I often find myself irritated that I am being denied the kind of self-transcendence, the absorption, that somewhere deep down I must feel is *owing*. What I'm not sure of is whether I feel it's what I owe the

⁴⁸ Ridout, p. 8.

⁴⁹ Ridout, p. 10.

theatre, or *what the theatre owes me*. Arguably, this confusion arises from the tension between the expectation of a work's aesthetic autonomy, and the feeling of having paid for a particular sort of experience.

9. Muteness, hiddenness and the sculptural funny

For Ridout the tension between the absorptive promise of the theatre and the fact that it remains an encounter between bodies is the source not only of embarrassment, but of a pleasurable sort of unease. The affect he is describing is contiguous with the funny affects I am responding to in this thesis more broadly, and in this discussion in particular. But now, it is necessary to make things a bit more explicit, to push at what might be particularly, peculiarly funny in this moment of exchange and confusion between a (supposedly) non-figurative sculpture and a certain kind of funny anthropomorphism that Fried names as '*stage presence*'.⁵⁰

In a curious passage, one that endures as the most memorable and revealing of '*Art and Objecthood*', Fried describes a hypothetical encounter with a literalist object. He writes that,

In fact, being distanced by such objects is not, I suggest, entirely unlike being distanced or crowded by the silent presence of another person; the experience of coming upon literalist objects unexpectedly – for example, in somewhat darkened rooms – can be strongly, momentarily, disquieting in just this way.⁵¹

Ridout reads in this passage an encounter that is '*intensely theatrical in its circumstances*' – an uneasy intimacy, pervaded by a sense that something is not quite right. Just as, in the theatre, the wished-for absorption never quite comes off: '*The proxemics are inducing discomfort. Someone is too close or too far away, in a "darkened" space, too*'.⁵² What's at play in this discomfort?

⁵⁰ Fried, p.155.

⁵¹ Fried, p. 155.

⁵² Ridout, p. 9.

Proxemics, semi-darkness and also silence. A silence that is somehow full. When considered in conjunction with the anthropomorphic presence that Fried is describing, this silence can only be thought of as a *withholding* of speech, which makes it sound as if Fried is disconcerted that the sculpture refuses to speak to him. Why would this bother Fried? What is it about this feeling of co-presence that he finds so unacceptable?

Certainly, this anthropomorphic quality undoes the claims that Judd and Morris make on behalf of their work. Fried cites Judd's explicitly denunciation of the 'naturalistic and anthropomorphic image' formed by sculpture that is 'made part by part, by addition, composed', adding that Judd 'would include include the work of David Smith and Anthony Caro under this description'.⁵³ This is what Judd is striving against when he aims for the wholeness, the singleness of shape that he calls a 'Specific Object'. For Fried, however, it is precisely this emphasis on shape – the 'singleness' of which secures 'the wholeness of object'⁵⁴ – that generates what he identifies as a curiously anthropomorphic effect. For, he writes, is it not the case that 'the entities or beings encountered in everyday experience in terms that most closely approach the literalist ideals of the nonrelational, the unitary and the wholistic are *other persons*'.⁵⁵ Fried is reflecting here on the fact that the scale of much literalist work, compares fairly closely with that of the human body. Alongside their tendency to be roughly-human sized, Fried also objects to the perceived *hollowness* of literalist art works, citing 'the impression, which numerous critics have mentioned, that Judd and Morris's pieces are *hollow*'.⁵⁶ This apparent hollowness (the illusion of it, if not the objective fact), is for Fried, 'almost blatantly anthropomorphic' because it is by dint of this that the sculptures exude 'the quality of having an *inside*'.⁵⁷

Fried's perception of the thing's interiority, or perceived or imagined inner space, as 'almost blatantly anthropomorphic' is consistent with a way of imagining humanness long established within the aesthetic tradition. After all, having an inside and an outside is, as Barbara Johnson notes, the most general

⁵³ Fried, p. 150.

⁵⁴ Fried, p. 151.

⁵⁵ Fried, p. 156.

⁵⁶ Fried, p. 151.

⁵⁷ Fried, p. 156.

description of a human. In an essay on figures of muteness within the poetic tradition, Johnson reminds us that, like Keats' Grecian urn, mysterious and silent, things with interiority are often used as metaphors for the relation between 'body and soul, expression and intention'.⁵⁸ Inner space connotes the space of sentience, and it is something one 'has'. And here, having gets confused with being, which in turn suggests some kind of agency. For what disconcerts Fried is his sense of these sculptures *having* an inside, and thus it is possible to detect, within his writing, a suspicion that the things themselves are deliberately, maliciously withholding something from him. Yes, the sense of something *withheld* is there in, and perhaps constitutive of, the theatrical-sculptural funniness I am attempting to articulate. Something withheld, hidden, but *there*. Indeed, what Fried finds particularly egregious is the fact that this anthropomorphism *is* 'hidden'. His comments on this reveal that he considers hiddenness to be inherently theatrical: 'a kind of latent or hidden naturalism, indeed anthropomorphism, lies at the core of literalist theory and practice. The concept of presence all but says as much'. Her writes, 'what is wrong with literalist work is not that it is anthropomorphic but that the meaning and, equally, the *hiddenness* of its anthropomorphism are incurably theatrical'.⁵⁹ So, although minimalist artists make literalist *claims*, vociferously rejecting figurativism in favour of a 'new,' non-representational objecthood, Fried is arguing that the *work* of the minimalist artists fails at non-figurativeness by emitting, in spite of what appeared to be their creators' best efforts, an anthropomorphic – or 'naturalist' presence. What's more, this is an anthropomorphic presence that is hidden, and that seems to also itself *depend on* hiddenness – the impression that the objects 'have' an interior, a space within.

I want to nudge this towards an apprehension of the *funniness* of Fried's relation to these objects. He is disconcerted by the idea of being in a room with an object that is 'performing' this muteness, this hollowness. He senses that its anthropomorphic performance is all the more aggressive, obtrusive because it

⁵⁸ Barbara Johnson, 'Muteness Envy', in *The Barbara Johnson Reader*, ed. by Melissa Feuerstein, Bill Johnson Gonzalez, Lili Porten and Keja Valens (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 200-216 (p. 201).

⁵⁹ Fried, p. 157.

is hidden. The thing looks nothing like a person, and does not appear to be making any effort in that direction, yet it is exuding a quality that is person-like. It is exuding this quality precisely *by* withholding it, and disconcerting Fried precisely with the sense of this withholding. And, tellingly, Fried characterizes this quality with a theatrical metaphor, naming it as a ‘kind of *stage* presence’. This stage presence is, he writes, ‘a function, not just of the obtrusiveness and, often, even aggressiveness of literalist work, but of the special complicity that the work extorts from the beholder’.⁶⁰ Fried describes this ‘stage presence’ almost with a sense of consternation. He finds it aggressive. Not only is the object hiding something, but it is hiding that it is hiding it, and it wants him to play along. Indeed, it has given him no choice *but to* play along. Fried’s consternation at this state of affairs tells us something about the sculptural-theatrical funny. And it tells us something about Michael Fried. What disturbs him is a sense of uncertainty about what a thing *wants*. He accuses it of needing him – to look at it, activate it, assure it of its value. And then he seems upset by the possibility that it doesn’t need him at all, or at least, seems to be pretending not to care. This registers in the suspicion that the object’s silence is, somehow, *aimed at him*.

A fuller account of the way gendered tropes are played out in the Friedean scene of looking would need to take into account the way much Minimalist sculpture was, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, bound up with the performance of a certain kind of masculinity. As Jackson notes, he ‘literalist’ tendency Fried identifies was bound up with the appropriation of classed symbols of authenticity associated with the manual worker (for example, Tony Smith’s ‘cross-class fascination with the smoke stacks on the New Jersey turnpike’⁶¹). Although this fuller account lies beyond the scope of the current discussion, it is possible to conjecture that Fried’s status *as man* is bound up with the particular funniness his text performs. What can be detected, in his little vignette of happening across the sculpture, is the self-consciousness of a man becoming aware of his own physical presence in a room. He is disconcerted because he feels he is being observed, and he somewhat incongruously – and

⁶⁰ Fried, p. 155.

⁶¹ Jackson, p. 132.

perhaps a little but hysterically – calls this ‘theatrical’. We might conjecture that he responds thus because, as a man, an art critic at that, he is used to being the one doing the looking. The *thingness* of ‘Michael Fried’ within this scene – the man with the status of a critic – is critically useful, usefully suggestive, as an exemplary body, a body with a famous man’s name.

Could it be that there is a kind of funniness where the theatrical and the sculptural meet, an attitude or affective quality that, in a gallery context, might get called ‘theatrical,’ and in a theatrical context, might feel somehow ‘sculptural’? If so, it might feel something like ‘I LOVE YOU’, an ostentatious and sentimental declaration being summarily taped onto a grey vinyl floor by a performer who handles the task with the adeptness of a technician. Or like those words, ‘I LOVE YOU’ being almost, but not quite covered over using the material of the floor, the material we’d been sitting here looking at but not really seeing, but that now is being recruited – or nudged – into action. It might inhere in the play between amplification and and muteness, the funny combination of the two. Or this sculptural-theatrical funniness might inhere in the uncertainty over whether this is something a person is doing, or something the show itself is doing. Or in the slow movement of the show through moments of at which something almost gets said, but does not, or the sequences that feel like a reveal, but then the reveal does not reveal anything apart from, perhaps, another kind of hiding.

I Cenci/Spettacolo stages the juxtaposition between live microphones and deadpan performers. Or between the lively intangibility of air and the stubbornness of matter that, in spite of its aggressive withholding, or perhaps because of it, cannot help but emit an anthropomorphic presence. What can be said about the microphone onstage that amplifies nothing, besides itself being picked up and set down again, on its stand? Perhaps this microphone is amplifying, in some sense, that which the show *itself* is withholding. A microphone that makes palpable a certain kind of a sculpturally funny theatricality, one that hides the fact that it is hiding within its ploy or pretension toward self-evident literalness.

10. Heroics

'We don't need to be "loyal" to Artaud,' Kinkaleri write, in the programme notes for *I Cenci/Spettacolo*, 'we aren't motivated by drawing family trees that list the names of those closest to the madman'. And perhaps the question of an author, an artistic forebear, a discoverer or idol is what is being staged in their show. Artaud's 1935 production of *The Cenci* in Paris closed after just seventeen performances. Compromised from the start by Artaud's acceptance of a theatre 'completely unsuitable' for the realization of his artistic vision of a Theatre of Cruelty (the Folies-Wagram, which was 'traditionally constructed, and specialized in operetta'⁶²), it was, according to Artaud's friend, Roger Blin, 'a commercial piece, half way to what he wanted to do in the theatre'. Artaud reportedly said, 'There will be between the Theatre of Cruelty and *The Cenci* the difference which exists between the roaring of a waterfall or the unleashing of a natural storm, and all that remains of their violence once it has been recorded in an image.'⁶³ This reminds me of how, near the beginning of Kinkaleri's *I Cenci*, as the walking duvet retreats, it deposits a piece of paper, which reads 'HOUDINI 1901'. The name is that of a famous escapologist, the year is when his famous straightjacket stunt was filmed for commercial release by the French movie company Pathé.⁶⁴ A reminder, perhaps, that Harry Houdini's feats of endurance, 'heroic' as they may have been, were undertaken for the purposes of entertainment, 'just for show'.

During the 2000s, Rachel Harrison made a series of works named after notable men, some of them 'public figures', some what you might describe as 'American idols': Amerigo Vespucci, Fats Domino, Al Gore, Johnny Depp – all of them her characteristic clumsy-looking monoliths, but sculpted in such a way that a nook or outcrop might bear some small item, a small element of décor linked via association to the name (*Al Gore* has a domestic thermostat, *Fats Domino* a can of SlimFast, *Johnny Depp* a single hoop earring). Kelsey describes these

⁶² Stephen Barber, *Antonin Artaud: Blows and Bombs* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1993)

⁶³ Both cited in Barber, p. 70.

⁶⁴ *Merveilleux Exploits du Célèbre Houdini à Paris* (Pathé, 1901).

works as operating ‘between disguise and sculpture’: they operate at the ‘point beyond which sculptural properties of material, form and structure disperse into more hysterical outbreaks of style’.⁶⁵

‘Women can’t have heroes,’ Harrison once said,⁶⁶ and this makes me think, once again, about my position as a female reader and spectator of men, famous men. It makes me think about my enjoyment of the performances of Stewart Lee and Paul de Man and J.L. Austin. ‘I am seduced by Austin’, writes Felman, in a move I resisted (perhaps in large part aware that I would be writing extended chapters on Stewart Lee, not a dead writer but a living man, a man whose body is onstage for me to see, and for me to be seen to be seeing). I am, though, in some sense, seduced by Kinkaleri’s performance. I *loved* it, and I found it unbearable. Perhaps what I found peculiarly intensely funny was its staging of maleness as a silly (yet, in some other sense, deadly serious), kind of spectacle.

11. The joke of the brick

At the moment of acknowledging that I *might* have seen, that I was close to seeing, the premiere of *I Cenci*, I put a brick in the middle of the chapter. Almost like the brick, set down, could in its solidity mitigate the regret, and ephemerality of performance. Lugging a brick around in a suitcase is a somewhat ridiculous thing to do. It is also a reassuring, if funny, way of retrieving the lost hours dedicated to the work of theatre-making and live performance, remembering the physical work of it.

In the context of my autobiography, the brick bespeaks the anxiety of influence, and attests to way influence plays out less as a linear, family-tree style set of ‘inheritances’ and more as a series of semi-planned acts of beachcoming,

⁶⁵ Kelsey, p. 121.

⁶⁶ Peter Schjeldahl, ‘The Shape We’re In: The Timely Sculpture of Rachel Harrison’, *The New Yorker*, 22-29 December 2014 <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/12/22/shape>> [accessed 29 August 2015].

bumping-intos, contingencies, and awkwardness in foyers. Often anxious and confused as much as they are hopeful and intentional, these are the material practices that one might undertake in the effort to stake out a 'place' for oneself within a particular professional field.

Incidentally, I can't remember what happened to the actual brick; I have an idea we threw it into the Spree, the river that runs through Berlin, but this may have just been something we had said we would do. The brick gets a little less solid, a little less real. Whatever poetic, elegiac or humorous qualities it retains, the brick story, and the brick joke, that we told onstage in Berlin in 2006 would certainly mean differently now, in 2016, after the referendum, 'Brexit', in the midst of a housing crisis, as does much of the theatrical work, and the jokes therein, that I loved, and I made, or tried to make, in the early years of the 21st century.

The Ryanair excess baggage fee was a worthwhile investment; not only did it bring the brick story up-to-date, but it reassured us that the brick was, after all, a *literal thing*, with a weight, a heft to it. But the baggage fee also, it could be said, reincorporated the brick into a system of commerce and exchange. Not necessarily by putting a price on it, but rather, by turning it into a joke. Perhaps the question that should be asked here is whether it is possible to conduct cultural materialist enquiries in proximity to jokes. Do jokes, which have a different sort of value, or 'pay-off', subvert the materialism of the 'things' they reference, or transform?

How does a feeling of finding things funny, a response that might be thought of as wholly 'subjective', respond to questions of history, the historical and the materialist? There is something improper about it, something exposing, embarrassing. It might say more about you than you realize. Because there's an element to it that is 'personal': a sense of humour as something one 'has'. Equated with a sense of identity with and from the things we like – what appeals to me, my sense of humour. A sense of humour defines me, is desirable ('GSOH') and is something in which I take pleasure in identifying myself, and it is something that is shared. It sounds quite glib, a shared sense of humour, and

this may be why it is not often directly acknowledged as a required quality for collaboration, and factor in professional spectatorship. This may be because an 'in joke' is generally something to be avoided (or at least, not admitted to).

What is the relation between personal history (with its emotions and associations and attachments, its baggage) and social or economic or cultural history (i.e. history 'proper')? If the relation is one of uncertainty, perhaps this is especially so in the field of performance. In which each performance-thing is hyper-contextual and ephemeral. And in particular in this kind of performance making, in which, as Kelleher notes, people 'invest lives'. This investment gives a particular weight, something emotional, to certain work, work that by its look or feel is quite silly or light. This undoubtedly influences that the kinds of 'investments' I might have in certain kinds of work as a spectator and hence as a scholar (a professional spectator, albeit one who spectates in an 'unprofessional' manner – at home, years too late, distractedly). My strong feelings (pleasure and desire and delight) for the *things* in the show and the *thing of the show* force me to ask certain questions – can a response that is so subjective, coded as it is by the particularities (contingencies, vagaries) of my personal experience (*my story*), be usefully considered in more properly academic way, a culturally materialist way (*history*)? Can there be such a thing as a personal, embodied kind of cultural materialist performance criticism? Or perhaps the question should be, can materialist performance criticism ever be anything other than personal, embodied, emotional, coded by the contingencies of experience?

Chapter One ended with an acknowledgement of a recurrent complaint about Austin's modes of philosophizing which had to do with its implicit assumption that, 'obviously', the body seen to be doing the uttering is the one 'behind' the act. In response, I argued that, by thinking about Austin's philosophical performance as itself the act of a speaking body, it becomes possible to think of his work as a performative displacement of his *own* first person, through the act of speaking his example. I wonder how this chapter's acknowledgement, staging, of my own first person relates to this. However, it might be observed that, in this chapter, I never quite make it onto the stage. In my evasive

declarations I do not allow myself to become fully visible, thus revealing the contingency of my own embodied position. Instead, and with the aid of my brick decoy, I go through a set of discursive and writerly maneuvers that amount to a funny sort of hiding. The chapter that follows will attempt to remedy this set of affairs by bringing the question of my authorial, and spectatorial, first-person if not onto the stage, then certainly into the room, in an embodied way.

CHAPTER 4

Identification, collectivity, guilt: on being Stewart Lee's audience

1. The room

In this, the final Chapter of the thesis, I wish to return to the conceptualization of direct address that I elaborated in the Introduction. There, I suggested that, in an age of digital communications, the *idea* of a person standing there, saying things out loud, in the presence of others, remains important to the way we *imagine* speech. I also considered the various ways in which, in the performance of direct address, and especially the performance of a self-referencing direct address into a microphone, the act of speech is oddly *redoubled*, as though the performer's act were saying, 'I am speaking to you, and I am *calling attention to the fact that* I am speaking to you'. If, as my reading of Felman and Butler has suggested, there is something *inherently* funny about the speaking body, then this implies that funniness may itself be redoubled when a body stands up to show its performance of speaking, a funniness that can be felt before a single word has been spoken. But what of the funniness of *being spoken to*? How does it feel to become, even notionally, the destination, or the object, of a direct address? Does this call into play another body – not the one standing up, on the stage, in the light, but the one (the numerous ones) sitting there, down below, in the semi-dark?

When Stewart Lee steps onto the stage, the first thing he says is this:

Um. Now, I'm going to tell you a story, right, it'll take about, um, an hour and fifteen minutes, er which is a little bit too long for a show without an interval. But it's also not long enough to split into two halves. It's kind of disappointing either way. But it is a little bit too long, so if you need to go for a wee during that, you can do that and I'm not the sort of person who picks on anyone.¹

¹ Transcript cited from Lee, *How I Escaped*, p. 161.

This is *90's Comedian*, a show that Lee first began performing in 2005, and stopped performing in 2006. Another performance that I found funny, another show I never saw live. I watched it on DVD, in 2009, in a room in a shared house in Stoke Newington in North London, with my friend Holly. And this fact, you may quite understandably be thinking, makes this performance a rather unsuitable case study for a chapter on the feelings associated with direct address. But then, onstage at the Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff in 2005, Lee turns to look directly into the camera and says:

Likewise, if you're watching this at home on a DVD and you need to go for a wee, you can just pause it and I'll have no problem with that. I won't even know that it's happening, literally.²

And we laughed, my friend Holly and I, at the way the man on the screen (a man we had not really thought much about since the nineties) acknowledged and anticipated our deferred and distant act of spectating, addressing us *as if* we were in some sense co-present, in the room. Or rather, addressing the camera *as if* it were us (or *me*, for there is something peculiarly intimate about the way he leans right into the camera and refers to my potential urge to wee), or a window onto this room, the one we are in. This mediated address might be argued to be somehow both more and less 'direct' than the way Lee speaks to me, and my co-spectators, in the situation of the live gig. Is it a different kind of phenomenon altogether? It certainly *feels* different. And yet, I think it could have something to tell us about the feelings associated with being addressed in one's position as spectator, audience member, in a live situation. As I will argue, the feelings of being addressed are mixed up with feelings about not quite 'being', or feeling not quite 'addressed', and open onto another set of weird redoublings that concern my feelings of coincidence and non-coincidence with my own body, the bodies around me, and the collective 'body' that is the audience.

First of all, let us set the scene. The gig takes place in a room. Not the same

² Stewart Lee, *Stewart Lee – 90's Comedian*, dir. by Craig Griffith (Cardiff: Go Faster Stripe, 2006), DVD.

kind of room as my room at home, the one where I watch my DVDs and read my books, but a 'room for comedy'. Stand-up comedians call it this: they say 'the room'. For her research into what makes a 'good room' for comedy, Sophie Quirk spoke to comedians, promoters, who told her they preferred low ceilings and hard surfaces, densely packed seating, low stage so that people feel close to the performer, no awkwardly placed doors.³ And yet comedians perform in all kinds of spaces – from stadiums to black-box theatres, from student union bars to the London Palladium. In all cases, the comedian will, with pleasing matter-of-factness, refer to the performance space as 'the room'. In some sense, this emphasis upon the four walls, ceiling and floor reflects the acoustic imperative of stand-up: the room contains and amplifies laughter. As stand-up Dan Atkinson tells Quirk, 'you want nowhere for the laugh to go', which is why 'comedy in a tent's usually shit because the fabric just lets the laugh out'.⁴ But comedians are not only referring to the physical space when they speak of 'working the room', they are also referring to a combination of factors, including the collective mood and character of the audience. And, as Quirk notes, just as it is possible to refer to 'practices that seek to shape the room', it seems 'audiences can also be shaped, and their behaviour manipulated and contained'.⁵ A good room for comedy, then, is not the same as my room at home, the one in which I watch my DVDs, read my theoretical texts and look at photographs of sculptures; in the context of stand-up performance, 'the room' speaks of that which is collective. The phrase itself is collectivizing. If I go out to *that* room, along with all those other bodies, I become *part* of 'the room', synonymous with it.

On the question of direct address, the critical discourse of stand-up tends to make certain kinds of claims regarding the relation between the stage and the auditorium (claims that, often, are part of a more or less explicit effort to differentiate the stand-up address from theatrical speech). For example when, near the beginning of *Getting the Joke*, Oliver Double attempts a definition of

³ Sophie Quirk, 'Containing the Audience: The "Room" in Stand-Up Comedy', *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, 8:2 (2001), 219-238.

⁴ Quirk, p. 228.

⁵ Quirk, p. 222.

stand-up, he lists three main points ('besides the fact of it being funny'). The second, titled 'direct communication', reads:

It involves direct communication between performer and audience. It's an intense relationship, with energy flowing back and forth between stage and auditorium. It's like a conversation made up of jokes, laughter and sometimes less pleasant responses.⁶

In stand-up, it seems, the audience plays an active role in shaping the comedian's performance. This is why many people find the idea of performing stand-up terrifying. The 'room' in which stand-up is performed is, typically, a noisy place, wherein the audience is licensed to interrupt or redirect or cut short a routine, and, in the final instance, force the comedian from the stage. As Double writes, in the third of his definitional points:

The stand-up comedian is duty bound to incorporate events in the venue into the act. Failure to respond to a heckler, a dropped glass or a ringing phone will result in the audience losing faith in a performer's ability.⁷

This assertion of the comedian's 'duty' to respond to 'events' is preceded by the subheading: 'present tense'. Double is clear about this: because it 'acknowledges the performance situation', stand-up can be said to take place 'in the present tense, in the here and now'.⁸ Double is making an ontological claim here, about stand-up's liveness. At first glance, what he is proposing seems easy enough to accept. Stand-up *does* happen in the 'here and now': the comedian addresses the audience directly or, as Double has written elsewhere, works 'straight out to the audience, performing in the first person and the present tense'.⁹ In this chapter, I ask how it feels to be addressed ('directly') by a performer standing on a stage. It is by paying close attention to the modes of address deployed by a specific performer – Stewart Lee – within the space of a single performance, that my discussion puts various kinds of

⁶ Double, *Getting the Joke*, p. 19.

⁷ Double, *Getting the Joke*, pp. 19-20.

⁸ Double, *Getting the Joke*, p. 19.

⁹ University of Kent, 'Staff Profiles: Dr Oliver Double', <<https://www.kent.ac.uk/arts/staff-profiles/drama/double.html>> [accessed 16 May 2016].

pressure on the definition Double sets out. In particular, it problematizes his conflation of the 'here and now' of the performance (the 'situation' unfolding 'in the venue') with a *grammatical* 'present tense'.

As my work here has unfolded, I have found that attending to modes of address means paying close attention to what Denise Riley calls those 'deeply inherent aspects of language which do not refer and yet which themselves act'. For, 'a language also works at the pervasive level of its musculature, quietly but powerfully, through its grammatical and syntactic joints'.¹⁰ Perhaps, as a level of attention, the grammatical sounds a little dry, unpromising and far removed from the excitement of the stand-up gig (especially in light of my declared need to get out more). But, working under Riley's influence, I hope to demonstrate how apparently minor linguistic junctures – pronouns, propositions, shifts in tense – are instrumental to the highly (and often strangely) *physical* affectiveness of speech. What seems like grammatical quibbling is often the key to the 'deeply inherent' funniness of speech's relation to the bodies it describes, positions and speaks through (or, as Riley would have it, *across*).

Although stand-up's direct address might *seem* simple (for what could be more straightforward, more direct, than a performer stepping onto a stage and acknowledging those who have gathered, saying 'Hello, good evening, thanks for coming?'), I will argue that direct address is a difficult and strange phenomenon that masquerades as simple, straight, and self-evident. Stand-up's *illusion* of simplicity relies to some extent on familiarity; when practitioners, scholars and audiences speak of stand-up, a claim to directness is often accompanied by the recourse to the spectator feeling *as if* they are a partner in a normal, everyday conversation. As the folklorist Ian Brodie writes, 'Much of stand-up comedy's appeal is precisely its contiguity with small group talk, as opposed to oratorical or theatrical modes'.¹¹ Or, as John Morreall notes in his *Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, 'the more successful stand-up comics

¹⁰ Riley, *Impersonal Passion*, pp. 3-4.

¹¹ Brodie, p. 43.

talk to their audiences in as conversational way as possible'¹² For comedian Ross Noble, when a gig is going really well, 'The conceit of watching a show is forgotten and the audience member feels like the comic is talking to them in a one-on-one conversation'.¹³

As my work in the Introduction and Chapter Three has attested, the 'conversational' and 'everyday' modality of the stand-up comedian's performance depends upon the microphone, that which, in the words of Brodie, 'makes one loud without forcing one to be loud'.¹⁴ For Brodie, this returns the public act of addressing a crowd to 'the intimacy of face-to-face encounter'.¹⁵ And here, we can read another symmetrical way of describing the stand-up 'encounter': face-to-face, one-on-one. The recurrence of these symmetrical terms in definitional talk around stand-up signals the importance of a notional reciprocity and dialogism at the scene of performance. As a folklorist conducting a study of stand-up comedy, Brodie has a particular agenda. Broadly speaking, folklore operates under the guiding principle that popular culture originates from 'the people', and therefore it is incumbent upon Brodie to frame stand-up in these terms in order to justify it as a legitimate object of folkloric enquiry. At the start of his book he recounts an objection, from a colleague, that 'This is not folklore! This is show business!'¹⁶ Brodie's (retroactive) response to this objection structures the central argument of his book. In the first place, stand-up, is 'a form of talk that on the surface is more or less indistinguishable in potency from everyday forms of vernacular discourse', which falls under the purview of folklorists.¹⁷ And yet, as Brodie acknowledges, stand-up comedy enacts 'a complex *transposition* of vernacular forms of talk into a more formal, mediated context and [...] this more formal, mediated context introduces a distance between audience and performer that needs reconciliation'. Stand-up's 'professionalization' of intimate talk imposes a

¹² John Moreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 83.

¹³ Noble in Double, p. x.

¹⁴ Brodie, p. 52.

¹⁵ Brodie, p. 51.

¹⁶ Brodie, p. 3.

¹⁷ Brodie, p. 43.

distance: the 'indeterminate spatiotemporal distancing' of mediation (DVD, television or YouTube), or what Brodie calls 'the socio-cultural distance of speaking to a group of which he or she is not a member'. Or, more simply, it might be proxemics: 'the performer being on a stage and the audience not'.¹⁸

Brodie's own professional imperative (that he frame stand-up performance as properly folkloric, 'of the people') means that he is very insistent upon 'overcoming' the separation between performer and spectators, 'reconciling' distance with intimacy. He frames his critical task as 'working toward the successful reconciliation of intimacy and distance'.¹⁹ At times, his account is *over* insistent upon this reconciliation almost to the point of absurdity. It seems Brodie is determined to eradicate from his account of stand-up performance not only 'distance' and 'separation', but physical space as such. Stand-up 'aims at bridging distances',²⁰ he writes, including, most directly, the 'separation of the performer and audience through the use of a stage'.²¹ He insists that the stage should be thought of as a 'concession to performance rather than a divisive structure',²² which can be overcome through the use of a microphone, which enables the performer's voice to 'transcend the acoustic limitations of physical space'.²³

What I find particularly problematic in Brodie's determination to reconcile discordant or distancing aspects of stand-up performance is a tendency I read also in Noble's and, to a lesser extent, Double's accounts: the minimization of the comedian's body. Electroacoustic amplification is instrumental to this downplaying: the microphone amplifies, and it minimizes. It amplifies speech, but by enabling the comedian to speak in a 'natural' register, minimizes the physicality of speaking. Arguably though, the downplaying of the bodily aspect of speech occurs not just in the discourse around stand-up, but also onstage, where it is possible to observe, for example, Stewart Lee standing still,

¹⁸ Brodie, p. 8.

¹⁹ Brodie, p. 6.

²⁰ Brodie, p. 8.

²¹ Brodie, p. 43.

²² Brodie, p. 49.

²³ Brodie, p. 51.

apparently doing nothing with his body, apart from the occasional gesture, for pretty much the entire hour he is onstage (although it is worth noting that Lee is famous for being amongst the least animated of stand-ups currently at work). This may be why, if the comedian's body is mentioned at all in accounts of stand-up performance, it is usually in order to add a bit of surrounding context to a quoted joke or routine. I include my own account of Lee's performance in this: in most cases you don't mention or describe the body unless the joke makes absolutely no sense on paper without explaining a particular gesture or facial expression. In an admiring account of stand-up, when the body *is* mentioned, there seems to be an accompanying attempt to minimize it, to emphasize the degree to which the comedian appears, as Noble puts it, to be 'hardly doing anything'. When a comedian is on form, Noble writes, 'Laughs are seemingly triggered by nothing more than tiny movements of the face or a pause that contains no words or sounds'.²⁴ And Double spends a whole chapter accounting for what happens when a comedian is 'doing *just enough* with the face, voice and body to paint a picture in the mind of the audience'.²⁵

Arguably, and curiously, comparing stand-up to a 'one-on-one conversation' or 'intimate face-to-face encounter' is also in some sense a displacement of the bodies of both performer and spectators. For the relation between spectator and performer is *not* one of symmetry, equality or intimacy. To put it crudely, from the perspective of the spectators, there are tens, perhaps even hundreds of *us*, but *only one comedian*. We, for the most part, sit down whereas the comedian, by definition, stands up. And we, from our seats, can see the stand-up comedian *standing* there, alone, on a stage. Perhaps it is raised, only slightly, as in a comedy club, in which case the stand-up stands above us. Or perhaps we look down from a raked seating bank, or even from a dress circle, upon the figure standing alone. In any case, the comedian has a microphone, and speaks, addresses us, and in doing so is visible to us, head to foot.

But it is worth considering that definitions of stand-up, at the level of their grammatical and syntactical joints, reflect an uncertainty that is also felt at the

²⁴ Noble in Double, p. x.

²⁵ Double, *Getting the Joke*, p. 398, emphasis added.

scene of the gig. As a spectator, is there something oddly doubled about the way you are addressed at times familiarly, in intimate tones, *as if* a partner in conversation, and yet are unable to reply (unless you heckle, which in most cases, rather than being a continuation of dialogue, *breaks* the *illusion* of conversation)? Perhaps a weird feeling of pseudo-symmetry pervades the gig itself?

Brodie's fifteen point definition of stand-up evidences a little uncertainty around the relation between the performer and the audience. To cite his first two points, stand-up comedy is typically, '1. a spoken, verbal performance by a sole individual; 2. in front of, to, and in collaboration with an audience'.²⁶ The first point is clear enough; the second, with its prepositional quibbling, less so – *in front of, to, with*. The confusion, which I take to be not accidental, and not trivial, arises when Brodie is attempting to ascertain the relation *not* between audience and performer (his third point attests to 'a clear demarcation' between the two), but between the audience and the 'spoken verbal performance'. The bodies on their own know their place; it is the phenomenon of spoken address that makes the relationship less certain – the act of speech is happening *in front of, to, and with* its addressees.

The face-to-face-ness, the *frontality* of speech is, of course, inherently connected with the acoustics of the voice. Near the beginning of *Dumbstruck*, his history of ventriloquism, Steven Connor asserts that 'the voice always requires and requisitions space'. According to Connor, it does so, first and foremost, by establishing relations of facing and frontality':

More even than my gaze, my voice establishes me in front of things and things in front of me, typically in an arc of about 30 degrees; for my voice pulls the world into frontality, and disposes it spatially in relation to this frontality. [...] As I speak, I seem to be situated in front of myself, leaving myself behind.²⁷

²⁶ Brodie, p. 14.

²⁷ Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 5.

Connor's formulation is suggestive of how, by speaking, it seems, one projects oneself (or one's 'self') forwards, thus *overcoming* space. It may seem logical, therefore, to surmise that the electroacoustic amplification of a voice only furthers and intensifies its space-disposing forward projection. However, we also might consider how, at the scene of the stand-up gig, electroacoustic amplification actually *disturbs* or disorientates the frontality of speech. Imagine the scene: a room, not large, audience gathered around, at tables, on three sides of the temporary stage. On the stage, which is raised only slightly, about 30cm, a man stands and speaks, his voice amplified by the microphone he holds up to his mouth. The spectators are closely packed, elbow to elbow, some of them are only meters from the comedian. This is the kind of set-up that might get called, in the brochure, 'intimate'. But its intimacy is not the easy, comfortable kind; I have seen Stewart Lee perform in this kind of room, and the fact that he is close to me *and* he is amplified makes for a weirdly distorted intimacy. The microphone both intensifies and displaces that feeling of being face-to-face with him for, depending on the placement of the speakers, his voice may be coming from somewhere behind him, or behind me.

I am describing a specific set-up, that which was used for the filming of Lee's show *90s Comedian*, which took place on 10 March 2006 in the black-box theatre space of Chapter Arts, in Cardiff. I was not present at this gig; as previously mentioned, I watched it on DVD. But, as the above paragraph attests, I *have* seen Stewart Lee perform in similar set-ups, on numerous occasions, and my experience of watching Lee's performance via the mediation of a DVD is strongly influenced by my physical memory of being co-present, there, at the scene of the gig. That is not to say that the two kinds of spectatorship are interchangeable, and neither am I suggesting that the memory of the 'live' experience can be called upon to reanimate the 'deadness' of a mediated performance (watching a DVD, I am no less a body, and no less *alive* than when I am out in public). Rather, as my opening vignette implied, in stand-up there is always already a complex interplay between the different modes of watching, and there are moments at which Stewart Lee exploits this.

In this chapter, I turn my attention to selected parts of *90s Comedian*, firstly, because it is a show that, as I will argue, not only mobilizes, but thematizes the funny incongruity of the speaking body. Lee calls attention to not only to his own body, but to various other bodies both imaginary and actual, including the body of the spectator. This show also depends on the funny identification of oneself with, and as, the imaginary collective body of the audience. In my reading, I will draw on Riley's work to reflect on how hopes and discomforts about collectivity open up political questions, and in doing so reveal a politics *within* language, a politics that operates pervasively, at the level of grammar.

2. Put on display

Methodologically, there is an element of convenience and necessity in my choice of *90s Comedian* as a case study. Attending to the grammatical subtleties of Lee's complex and shifting address requires close and repeated watching, and the DVD of the show, along with the published transcript, makes this possible. Wherever possible, I have set my observations about the feeling induced by my extended, repeated spectatorship of *90s Comedian* in dialogue with my own imperfectly remembered experiences of seeing Lee live. To further differentiate my mode of enquiry in this chapter from my work in Chapter Two, I will arrange citations of Lee's speech in a way that suggests the timing of his delivery, which I have notated from repeat viewing of the DVD.²⁸ Although I do not engage in extensive descriptions of Lee's appearance, his vocal timbre, or physical gestures, I hope the white space of the page will in some way leave a space for these to be imagined, and perhaps, in some curious way, the strong implication of what is absent may, for the reader, become funny in itself.

Lee embarks, in the early minutes of *90s Comedian*, on an account of 'a load of stuff' that happened to him the previous year (in 2005). Some of this 'stuff' may

²⁸ For a transcript of *90's Comedian*, see Lee, *How I Escaped*, pp. 159-222. I will give page references from this volume only when citing Lee's footnotes. When citing the words he speaks onstage, I do not reference Lee's transcript because I have modified the punctuation and layout of the text to reflect my own sense of his spoken delivery. I have also used square brackets to add, where relevant, details as to his gestures and to the reaction of the audience.

already be known to the people in the audience: as co-creator of *Jerry Springer: The Opera*, a ‘satirical musical’ which became a surprise West End hit, Lee had become the co-focus of a media furor surrounding the show’s irreverent depiction of Jesus Christ. A right-wing Christian pressure group had made every effort to close down the production, leading a campaign that resulted in an attempted High Court blasphemy prosecution and, in Lee’s words ‘the collapse of four years of work into financial non-viability’.

But the story he tells, in the opening ten minutes of the show, is a story about his body. In February, he explains, he had to go into hospital with diverticulitis – ‘that’s where your stomach starts to poison you’. While he was there, he tells us, he had to have ‘an endoscopy’. In his book, in footnote, Lee clarifies: ‘The procedure is actually called a ‘colonoscopy. But “endoscopy always seemed to work better onstage, perhaps because it didn’t include the telegraphing prefix “colon”’.²⁹ Onstage, he clarifies: ‘That’s where they insert a fibre-optic tube into your anus’. And then he sets the scene:

I was being wheeling in there,
and I was lying on a slab,
and I was naked
except for this kind of third-length, floral-print hospital gown,
right.
Goes down to about –
There.
*[indicating, with his left hand, a line across his chest, between the top
two buttons of his suit]*
Now, I’ve never understood the design of them,
because as a man, right,
I’m not ashamed
of my breasts, OK?
What I want concealed
are my genitals –
[indicating the area of his groin]
my penis, my two testicles
– they’re the source of my
shame – but,
the design

²⁹ Lee, *How I Escaped*, p. 166.

of the third-length, floral-print hospital gown
 makes it look as if I've
 chosen to expose them.

[pause]

In a coquettish fashion.

[pause]

Which I would never do, I wouldn't do that.

I think about my experiences of looking at Stewart Lee, from a seat down below. He is separated from the crowd and facing us and thus visible in a way I am not. He is offered up as thing to look at in a way that I am, to my relief, not, as I take a sip of beer and look towards him. How might I use that experience to write about what happens in this short sequence, which is ostensibly a preamble to the anecdote about the endoscopy (that is actually a colonoscopy)? As Lee speaks, I look towards the man onstage, whose body I can see, and I imagine the body being described. They are both the body of Stewart Lee, one of them visible, one of them imagined. The image I have is a strange mixture of anatomical diagram and idiosyncratically attired human and is conjured by Lee's exacting description of his appearance. The 'third-length floral-print hospital gown' ends, abruptly, to reveal a body that Lee has described with the unflinching impersonality of a doctor: 'genitals', 'penis', 'two testicles'. He didn't need to spell it out like this; he could have euphemized, dysphemized, implied. He could have said 'my bits' or 'down there' or 'my cock and balls'. He could have just left a suggestive silence, or pointed. But he said 'my genitals,' and then, specified further, 'my penis, my two testicles' and at the same time he gestured toward the area.

Lee's over-emphatic linguistic reference, when combined with a gesture of pointing to the body standing makes for a funny over-insistence, and puts me in mind of Judith Butler's distinctive take on the incongruous interrelation of a body and its speech. She writes, 'That the speech act is a bodily act means that the act is redoubled in the moment of speech: there is what is said, and then there is a kind of saying that the bodily "instrument" of the utterance performs'.³⁰ The act is redoubled. Is this why, in my imagination I am, rather than stripping Lee of

³⁰ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 11.

his clothes in order to reveal the nakedness beneath, *superimposing* an image of his naked body *over* his actual visible clothed one?

In the above citation, from *Excitable Speech*, Butler is responding to Shoshana Felman's rethinking of the Austinian speech act, which asserts that the 'scandal' of speech is that, as it is necessarily a bodily act, the speech act 'cannot know what it is doing'.³¹ In Butler's summation, Felman reminds us that the body, always to some extent 'unknowing about what it performs [...] always says something that it does not intend, and is not the emblem of mastery and control that it sometimes purports to be'.³²

Is this image of the speaking body apt to a professional comedian's act of speaking? It might be conjectured that, in the discourse of stand-up, the comedian's body is often upheld as, precisely, an 'emblem of mastery and control'. Noble, for example, writes that the comic must bring together 'the ideas, the performance and the environment [...] controlling and timing everything just right while the audience gets lost in the moment', before concluding that this is what makes stand-up 'the most direct form of expression with the comic being the writer, director and performer all at the same time'.³³ In the 'moment', it seems, of idealized mastery and control, the comedian – as writer, director and performer – embodies *all* the work of production, controlling everything, so that the audience can forget the 'conceit' of the show, and gets 'lost in the moment'. It might be added, the bodies of both performer and spectator get lost in this 'moment' too.³⁴

³¹ Felman, *Scandal*, p. 96.

³² Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 10.

³³ Noble in *Double*, p. xi.

³⁴ This is a theatrical metaphor for the speaking body that might be compared to that offered by J.L. Austin in *How to Do Things With Words*, as cited in Chapter One. As you may recall, Austin augmented Hippolytus' dismayed cry about his self-divided act of speech by adding theatrical personnel in parentheses, as in 'my tongue swore to... but my heart (or mind or other backstage artiste) did not', adding via a footnote: 'I do not mean to rule out all the offstage performers – the lights men, the stage manager, even the prompter' (Austin, *How to*, pp. 9-10). In Austin's metaphorical theatre, it seems the performance is vulnerable to 'noises off'. In Noble's metaphor, however, the 'production' (of speech) is going well. The naturalistic illusion is achieved. In a figure comparable to Yeats' dancer, the process is embodied by the performer in a moment of transcendence. Instead of 'How can we know the dancer from the dance?', it's a sort of 'How can we know the comedian from the comedy?', or 'How can we know the joker from

But, in Lee's endoscopy anecdote, there is something about Lee's body that, in a funny way, is out of his control. There is something excessive, and strange about the way his body appears, something that cannot be 'incorporated into the act'. I am appropriating that phrase from Double's comments as to the comedian's 'duty' to not only acknowledge or respond to 'events in the venue', but to 'incorporate' them into the act (the act of speech), making it all flow seamlessly, reassuring the spectators by making it seem that the comedian is in control not just of his or her own performance, but of *everything* that happens in the room. But Double's first point of definition is more suggestive, I think, of what is going on when Lee tells his endoscopy anecdote. Stand-up, writes Double, 'puts a person on display in front of an audience'.³⁵ At the level of syntax and grammar, we might observe that there is something peculiarly passive about Double's sentence: stand-up 'puts a person on display in front of an audience'? The person is not the subject but the object of this sentence; stand-up *itself* is the subject of the verb 'to put', suggesting that the comedian has not walked onto the stage of his or her own volition, but has been in some sense plonked down there by an external agency – a professional imperative, perhaps. But what is also being implied here is, I argue, the active and embodied nature of the spectator's *act* of looking. For it is when Double is acknowledging the visibility of the comedian's body that his grammatical voice slips into the passive, as though it were the gaze of the audience that rendered the comedian's act of appearing (of, literally, standing up on a stage) in some sense, out of his or her control.

When Stewart Lee says 'my genitals, my penis, my two testicles', he adds 'they're the source of my ...shame'. There slight pause before the word 'shame', which accentuates the humorousness of this admission, as though he is *confessing* to having genitals, and being ashamed of them. Where we might expect an admission of embarrassment, a little bit of blushing, Lee names his feeling as *shame*; an incongruously biblical concept for a stand-up show (although, as we know, this show is unfolding against the backdrop of a

the joke?'

³⁵ Double, *Getting the Joke*, p. 19.

threatened blasphemy prosecution, and will culminate in an extended sequence in which Lee, in similarly unflinching detail describes a drunken urine- and vomit-soaked encounter with Jesus Christ). In the anecdote, in the third-length hospital gown, Lee is conscious about being *seen as* having *chosen* to expose himself. And here, again, there is a play between active and passive, subject and object: ‘makes it *look as though I’ve chosen*’. By being put in the gown, the Stew-in-the-story has been *put* in a position of exposure. Here we might recall the passive voice of Double’s construction – stand-up ‘puts a person on display’. The Stewart Lee in the story is doubly shamed – by the exposure of his body (seen from the outside) and by the perception that he has in some sense willed this self-exposure. It is not insignificant that Stewart Lee the comedian, the one telling the story, is standing on a stage, as he says this, facing us, frontally, his body available to our gaze.

‘I *address* my account,’ writes Butler, ‘and in addressing my account I am exposed to you.’³⁶ Butler’s thoughts on exposure are drawn, in part, from those of Adriana Cavarero who, in *Relating Narratives*, develops a take on the post-Hegelian relational ethics of Hannah Arendt.³⁷ Her thoughts on exposure are the most useful for Butler’s argument, and the most suggestive for my own. Interpreting Cavarero, Butler writes, ‘we are beings who are, of necessity, *exposed* to one another in our vulnerability and singularity, and that our political situation consists in part in learning how best to handle – and to honour – this constant and necessary exposure’. Thus, at the scene of address, ‘the “I” encounters not only this or that attribute of the other, but the fact of this other as fundamentally exposed, visible, seen, existing in a bodily way and of necessity in a domain of appearance.’³⁸ And, therefore, each act of self-narration constitutes a further enactment, and a further exposure.

It may seem a bit trivializing, or else literal-minded, to refer to this Arendtian ethics of exposure in the context of a man who is being paid to stand on a stage

³⁶ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 38, emphasis original.

³⁷ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

³⁸ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, pp. 31-3.

and narrate a scene of his own merely embarrassing nakedness. But I think Lee's anecdote of literal self-exposure does also usefully draw attention to a kind of exposure that is being *enacted* when any speaking body stands up, in front of people, and tells a story about itself. And, at the beginning of *90s Comedian*, a show that will stage ethical questions that pertain to how bodies are spoken to and about, Lee reminds those present (and distant, at home) that they are looking at his body, something he himself *cannot* see. By so doing, he is *implicating* the people who are present *in* the act, reminding them of their responsibility. As we shall see, this will become more important (and more overt) as the show goes on.

3. Your anus

Before Lee begins telling the story of the endoscopy, before he even begins what I have called the preamble to the story of the endoscopy, he detains himself over an apparently minor, quite odd, qualification. It concerns, directly, the relative positions, and bodies – both actual and imaginary – of himself and his audience.

'So I had to go into hospital in North London,' he begins, speaking with characteristic slowness and emphasis – long pauses, careful enunciation:

and while I was there, I had to have an endoscopy, right.
That's where they insert a camera
on a fibre-optic tube
into your anus – now,
on that occasion, Cardiff, it was my anus.

But it would be your anus
if it were you
that were undergoing
the endoscopy, right,

because in medical science as a rule
there's a direct relation
between who is the subject of a procedure

and the information that the doctors are trying to find out.
That's why you can't send a friend along instead,
even if they really love investigative surgery.

Why does Lee embark upon this rather convoluted qualification at this point? It could be read as just a bit of waffle, bit of delay, a way to make a joke out of the necessary clarification of the medical term. In a footnote, Lee says what he set out to do was a play on the old gag about the name of the planet Uranus sounding like 'your anus'.³⁹ But, in fact, I think what this sequence actually ends up doing has to do with a funniness that inheres in the second-person pronoun, 'you', especially within the conditions of stand-up performance.

In a series of essays that set out 'grammar for performance writers', John Hall suggests, amongst the pronouns, 'I' and 'you' make particular demands upon the practitioner and theorist of performance. Amongst the pronouns, the first- and second-person might well be argued to be 'the most necessary' at the scene of speech, for 'They are the ones that seem to embed us, warmly even, in the action of exchange'. In speech, the second-person is necessary, 'if only to provide the pretext for a monologue'.⁴⁰ However, in performance, the 'you' becomes the nexus of uncertainty. For, as Hall writes, 'as soon as more than two are gathered' there arises the possibility of confusion over whether 'you' is plural or singular, Standard English having long since shed the thou/you distinction that might have helped clarify matters. We have to look for contextual clues, and it very soon becomes necessary to permit a body onto the hypothetical stage:

For example, in a vague, easily imagined context, someone is talking as I. There are three others present. The speaker's body, and her look, angle themselves subtly towards one of them: this must be you. Or perhaps the speaker keeps her eyes on the floor because she cannot bring herself to reveal the intimacy of a you. Or again, in oratorical confidence, her eyes sweep the company as she pluralizes – perhaps

³⁹ Lee, *How I Escaped*, p. 66.

⁴⁰ John Hall, 'Missing Persons: Personal Pronouns in Performance Writing', *Performance Research*, 3:1, 87-90 (p. 87).

even communalizes – the occasion.⁴¹

The first time he says 'your anus', Lee does not appear to looking at anyone in particular, but neither are his eyes to the floor. In the first instance, he is intoning 'you', in its possessive form, to denote a non-specific person-in-general. He is not talking about any specific person's anus, but merely clarifying a bit of medical terminology, 'an endoscopy – that's where they insert a fibre optic tube into your anus'. But there is something funny going on. As Lee suggests, 'your anus' does sound like the name of the planet, although here the innuendo is reversed – it is not that it sounds *like* Lee is saying the word 'anus', he *is actually* referring to the body part, anus. I find this funny in precisely the ambiguous, peculiar manner I have been parsing throughout this thesis. It doesn't quite make me laugh, but it *gets me*, somehow. Of course, Lee is not referring directly to *my* anus, but, because Lee speaks 'anus' with possessive pronoun that is personal, and because the anus is an intimate, private part of the body, there is something oddly, intrusively intimate about that phrase, 'your anus'.

Remember when Lee, superfluously, named his own private parts onstage? He said 'my penis, my two testicles'. Why is there something strange, discomfoting and slightly funny about hearing those anatomical terms preceded by a possessive singular personal pronoun? It might have something to do with what Riley, in a chapter quite appositely titled 'All Mouth and No Trousers', calls 'reification embarrassment', a specific variety of the broader phenomenon she names 'linguistic embarrassment'. Riley detects a 'distinctly grammatical or syntactical aspect to reification; the very word means making a thing out of what is not a thing'.⁴² When the words deployed name bodily parts or functions, there can arise 'a benign and useful embarrassment about uttering a language of reification'. By means of example, Riley cites the medical encounter: 'A conversation with a doctor gets easy enough once the threshold of naming has been crossed; here there's no pretense to anything except clinical description'. But 'this first linguistic awkwardness is inescapable'. Linguistic embarrassment

⁴¹ Hall, p. 88.

⁴² Riley, *Impersonal Passion*, p. 102.

in general is characterized by 'the desire not to be heard, first and foremost, as *a speaking thing*'.⁴³ Heard and, we might add, *seen*. We see the speaking body that reifies its own parts, the parts that are hidden, but now – disconcertingly – present. And, similarly, 'your anus' might be introduced in the form of a generality, in a dispassionate medicalised register, but when directed toward a person who is present, bodily, the words might well register as an improperly direct reference to a part of that person's anatomy, whether or not 'intended' to function in that manner. So, when Lee, very slowly and very deliberately, pronounces 'your anus', it *gets me* perhaps because it makes me feel, weirdly, that a part of *my* body is being invoked. If, as according to Ross Noble's measure, this show is going well and I feel as if Stewart Lee is speaking to me in a one-on-one conversation, then arguably this effect is intensified.

Before he says 'your anus', Lee calls the audience 'Cardiff', which is the conventional way for a gigging performer to identify an audience by addressing them by the name of the town, or the venue, in which the gig is taking place. Perhaps, by ascribing an *anus* to 'Cardiff', Lee is emphasizing and mobilizing the confusion over whether the 'you' the comedian addresses is to be imagined/experience as an individual or a collective *body*? Perhaps he is establishing a relationship of correspondence and substitutability between his own singular, personal anus, and the generalized, imaginary anus that belongs to everybody and nobody in particular, the transhistorical collective anus of all the people. To claim so would be to appropriate the terms offered by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabalais and his World*, where he sets out his highly influential theory of carnival laughter. For Bakhtin, carnival laughter is the most powerful mode of expression of an ancient tradition of folk culture, and grotesque realism is the literary expression of the carnivalesque. In this descriptive mode the bodily element 'is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people'.⁴⁴ And indeed, it might be said that, by end of this show, the scene in the Chapter

⁴³ Riley, *Impersonal Passion*, p. 101.

⁴⁴ Bakhtin, Mikhail. M., *Rabalais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 205.

Arts Centre is veritably Rabalaisian: Lee says, 'I vomited into the gaping anus of Christ till the gaping anus of Christ was overflowing with my sick', and then repeatedly says those sorts of things, whilst the audience, who were initially resistant, tense, finally succumb and the room dissolves into laughter. Lee himself has said that, during this final section, he was exploring the extent to which 'piling up of obscenity might reach a point where it became transcendental, or even beautiful',⁴⁵ transformed into 'something funny, something sometimes even moving or cathartic'.⁴⁶

In the realm of carnival, it is via an exaggeration of bodily orifices 'that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome'.⁴⁷ In *90s Comedian*, the image of the 'gaping anus of Christ' is, Lee suggests, in some sense a call-back to the comedian's own 'rectal invasion' in the early part of the show. By this logic, Lee's reference to 'your anus', the anus of both (and neither) my own body and Cardiff's is spoken in order incorporate the spectators into this overcoming of confines. And, to give this final 'cathartic' sequence of *90s Comedian* a Bakhtinian gloss, as the room 'dissolves' or 'collapses' into laughter so too do the formalities of the social world, and the distinctions between individuals: *I* lose control of *my* body, the whole room dissolves into anarchic laughter, and I can no longer tell where 'I' end and 'you' begin. In this interchange and interorientation there is the opportunity for me to reimagine my own corporeal subjectivity, for me to re-experience what my own body does (its urges and expulsions, its being taken hold of by this joyous and anarchic convulsion – whole room laughing) as being the expression of something bigger than me – 'we'.

Evocative as it may be, this account of what happens 'in the room' during Lee's performance of *90s Comedian*, by losing sight of the awkward and shifting quality of Lee's 'you', loses sight of the complex and uncertain addressive politics at play. The distinct positions of 'I' and 'you' are collapsed into a joyous, and revolutionary entity named 'we' representing 'the people'. However, for

⁴⁵ Lee, *How I Escaped*, p. 135.

⁴⁶ Lee, *How I Escaped*, p. 129.

⁴⁷ Bakhtin, p. 317.

Cavarero it is 'you', a pronoun she argues is symptomatically overlooked by modern and contemporary developments of political thought that offers a starting point for ethical work. The second-person pronoun is 'ignored by individualistic doctrines, which are too preoccupied with praising the rights of the *I*'. But neither does it find a home in 'the schools of thought to which individualism is opposed', which tend to avoid the contiguity of the you in order to avoid 'falling into the decadence of the *I*,' and instead privilege collective plural pronouns:

Indeed, many revolutionary movements (which range from traditional communism to the feminism of sisterhood) seem to share a curious linguistic code based on the intrinsic morality of pronouns. The *we* is always positive, the *plural you* is a possible ally, the *they* has the face of an antagonist, the *I* is unseemly, and the *you* is, of course, superfluous.⁴⁸

In spite of the 'cathartic' final movement of *90's Comedian*, and in spite of the resounding applause with which the Cardiff crowd respond to Lee's revelation, at the very end, that the transgressive material was aimed at those who would seek to apply 'limits to freedom of expression, either through legislation or intimidation or threats', I do not think *90's Comedian* offers an easy route to collectivity. Lee ends with a declaration that sounds serious, even noble: 'I personally haven't enjoyed the last half hour at all, I do it only to safeguard your liberty'. This feels like rhetoric proper, the stuff of great oratory. And, judging by their applause, the spectators seem to want to respond as though they were party to the affirmation of democracy as such, and perhaps that is how it felt. But, there remains something discomfiting and difficult about the strange amplified intimacy of this gig, a distorting sense of being just that little bit too close, a weirdly persistent over-emphasis on the moments, within address, at which the bodies in the room (and the body *of* 'the room') are made to feel self-divided, doubled.

⁴⁸ Cavarero, pp. 90-91.

4. Coincidence

Stand-up ‘happens in the present tense, the here and now,’ as Double states, with deceptive straightforwardness.⁴⁹ Deceptive, because, to quibble, much of the time, Lee is *not speaking* in the present tense. For example when Lee says ‘your anus’ he is speaking in the conditional, or subjunctive, tense: ‘it *would be* your anus *if it were* you’. This tense is speculative, it has to do with what *could* happen, what is possible. It establishes a relation of substitutability between mine and yours: it *was* my anus, it *could* be your anus. The I and the you are no longer face-to-face, sharing the same space and time (it might also be said that, since the point of exchange is my anus/your anus, the supposed face-to-faceness of the stand-up encounter is being funnily upended). In Lee’s stand-up (and indeed, in speech more generally), there is a complex *interplay of* tenses.

This interplay can be funny on more than one level. Remember when Lee said he wished the *Top Gear* presenter had died in the car crash that did nearly kill him? And then he said ‘it’s just a joke, like when they do their jokes on *Top Gear*’. I would like to spend a moment thinking once again about what he said after that: ‘But, coincidentally, as well as it being a joke, *it’s also what I wish had happened*’. To say ‘I wish...’ activates (and emphasizes) the subjunctive mood, and signals departure from ‘factual’ uttering into the realm of the imagined. To then say that, ‘coincidentally’, what has been expressed in the subjunctive *is also* actual, has a funny and complicated effect. Although it is not voiced explicitly, the disruptive and funny import of that word, *coincidentally*, is also being called into play when Lee gives an account of his endoscopy. It is in play in the ways we are invited to look at, and imagine, the man standing in front of us. In a recent interview, referring to his onstage persona, Lee hesitates over how to refer to the self he presents onstage: ‘with him, with me – I call him him’.⁵⁰ In the commentary published alongside *90s Comedian*, Lee differentiates the ‘visible Stewart Lee onstage’ from the ‘Stewart Lee inside his brain controlling him’.⁵¹ During his performance (and, arguably, whenever he

⁴⁹ Double, p. 19.

⁵⁰ Haydon, ‘Stewart Lee’.

⁵¹ Lee, *How I Escaped*, p. 199.

speaks, or appears, in public) there is a play of these different ‘hims’. The Stewart Lee onstage might tell a story *about* being onstage as ‘Stewart Lee’, or he might tell a story about being in the hospital, as the body about to undergo a procedure. As we know, there are also moments at which the body of Stewart Lee can stand for the body of another person (or, indeed, for a thing, such as a tea cosy). At certain moments there may be a coincidence between two or more of the Stewart Lees, at others a further subdivision or doubling. This occurs, for example, during the endoscopy anecdote, in which Lee not only describes his appearance when undergoing an uncomfortable and invasive procedure – ‘I was lying on a slab, and I was naked except for this kind of third-length, floral-print hospital gown. And I had a fibre-optic tube inserted into my lubricated anus’ – but then repeats the exact formulation each and every time he refers to his own body:

So I was being wheeled in there, I was lying on a slab, and I was naked except for this kind of third-length, floral-print hospital gown.
 And I had a fibre-optic tube inserted into my lubricated anus.
 And then suddenly, out of nowhere, and this is true, the doctor said,
 ‘Oh I see from your notes that you’re a famous comedian.’
 [*pause, slowly building laugh*]
 And I said to him,
 ‘There’s a problem with that sentence, isn’t there, Doctor?
 Which is that if the phrase “You are a famous comedian”
 is preceded by the qualifying phrase, “I see from your notes...” then I’m
 not,
 and I’m not anyway really.
 And then the nurse interrupted, rather aggressively. She went,
 ‘Well I’ve never heard of you’,
 as if it were I that had arrogantly introduced this vain notion into the
 endoscopic procedure.

Having been invited, as spectators, to imagine this ‘Stewart Lee’ figure we see before us with the body in the story, a body that is attributed both anatomically correct genitals, and shame (both of which are made available to our perception by the third-length floral-print hospital gown), we are now asked to imaginatively shift perspectives. We ‘see’ the body through the eyes of a pair of medical practitioners who, somewhat inappropriately, seem to be trying (and failing) to

envisage Stewart Lee as he would appear onstage: not as just any body, but as *a comedian*. We are imaginatively putting ourselves in the position of someone else, someone *failing* to imagine how Lee *would* appear on a notional stage whilst – coincidentally – looking at how Stewart Lee *does* appear, *is* appearing, ‘as a comedian’ onstage, on an actual, situated stage.

So I said to her, ‘Well I am a comedian.’
 And she said, ‘Well, you don’t look like a comedian.’
 And I said ‘Why?’ And she said,
 ‘A comedian should look funny.’

A pause here. Another laugh begins to build. Lee has made it possible for me to complete the joke in my mind, and the punchline is both verbal and visual: the words describing his appearance *and* the image of it. He does not even need to say the punchline. But he says it anyway, he makes it explicit:

Now, at the time...
 [*another pause, the laugh grows*]
 I was lying naked on a slab in a third-length, floral-print hospital gown,
 with a fibre optic tube inserted into my lubricated anus...
 [*pause*]
 If I’d seen that,
 I would have laughed.

Now something complicated is happening with temporality. Lee is saying what has, in effect, already been said. The force of the words was felt as a potential, as something implied, the laugh came before the punchline. And then, the words themselves, the by-now calcified formula, are funny, again *in themselves*.

During this joke, I feel the pleasure of that linguistic pre-echo, the anticipation of the words Stewart Lee will speak aloud. I laugh in recognition. I laugh also to signal that I understand where this is going. There is pleasure in being *able* to anticipate where it is going, it is the privilege of being ‘in on’ the joke. But, when it also means that I am made to visualize the image of the man standing in front of me lying naked, prone, undergoing an invasive procedure, the privilege is dubious. This sense of dubious inclusion, or complicity, in the jokes, will be

tested, pushed, as the show goes on. In the middle section Lee will congratulate me for 'being ahead of the punchlines'; towards the end, he will voice (what he imagines to be) my objections to his references to Jesus Christ in terms of a 'performer-audience bond of trust' that has been broken, precisely because (in Lee's citation of 'our' words) 'we weren't expecting to be made to visualize this image'.

The question of visibility and exposure is complicated here, because there is a certain confusion between internal and external, the narrated and the actual, the imagined and the spoken-out-loud. Lee is telling a story about his body undergoing an invasive procedure, one that makes his insides visible to himself: 'I lay there,' he says 'looking at live video-footage relay of my rotting and bleeding internal organs' (and a further confusion and correspondence happens at this point if you happen to, in fact, be watching Lee say this on video). At the same time, a confusion of boundaries happens between me and him, my imagined version of him and – this will become more important as the show goes on - how I imagine he has anticipated me, my response. And, as I will demonstrate, at various moments throughout this show (and Lee's work more generally), I am invited to enjoy the coincidence *and* non-coincidence of my own body, and self, with the various bodies, and positions, implied by Stewart Lee's 'you'.

5. Ethical problems, funny identification

The mid-section of *90s Comedian* is all about 'you'. This is not the 'cathartic' final sequence, the extended continuous story about meeting Christ on a dark road. It is a roughly thirty-minute sequence during which Lee moves through a series of different topics, and puts various kinds of pressure on the idea that stand-up address is in any way straightforward. In Lee's summation, this section functions to shape the audience into a 'workable unit' ready for the (it seems to him) more important business with Jesus. However, to read this section purely as a demonstration of Lee's 'skill, bravery and inventiveness', or the

'exceptional deftness' of his delivery⁵² (i.e. his 'mastery'), would be to lose sight of the ethical problems it stages, problems concerning ethics of speaking and being addressed, and more particularly, of speaking onstage as a stand-up comedian, and being in the room, being addressed as an audience.

As the show moves into its mid-section, Lee picks up a thread from earlier: the then-recent suicide attacks on the London Transport system on July 7 2005. He recalls watching the rolling news coverage on the day, much of which seemed to consist of 'journalists running around trying to get statements out of bomb survivors that weren't really in a fit state to give statements'. Taking a piece of paper from his pocket, he continues, 'And I started writing them down, right.' Unfolding the paper: 'This was, um, a guy that had survived the King's Cross bomb...', he reads: "The rescue workers have been amazing, really amazing, I mean I take my hat off to them. I'm not wearing a hat, obviously, but if I was, I would take it off." There is a hesitant, uneven laughter. Gesturing across the room, Lee says:

And laughs over here, a smattering of applause,
and then doubt spreading to the back corner.

[pause]

Now. Don't judge me for this, OK? Don't be uncomfortable,
I am a human being like you... I watched that news report,
I thought, 'I hope these people are OK...'

[pause]

But on the other hand, I'm also a comedian,
so I was thinking, 'Mind you, it's quite funny, I should write it down.'

With this abrupt undercutting gesture, it might seem like here Lee is saying that the stand-up gig is no place for ethics, that the business of comedy necessitates a suspension of those sorts of concerns. Job trumps essence. Like the mobster in an anecdote that Riley recounts: when questioned as to the 'humanity' of his actions, he shrugs and says 'I'm a gangster'.⁵³

⁵² These are the appraisals of Double when introducing Lee's work in general terms in *Getting the Joke*, p. 172.

⁵³ Riley, *Words of Selves*, p. 23.

Humanness is in question here too: 'I'm a human being like you,' says Lee, tacitly reassuring us that *we* are human beings, 'but *I'm* also a comedian.' Taking the heat off us – *you* are human, *I'm* a comedian – in other words, it's *me* doing it. And this seems to work, because next he quotes another survivor, "After the bus blew up, I saw people lying outside the British Medical Association headquarters. Ironic, but if you're going to do this kind of thing, that's the place to do it I suppose", and this, which with its reference to injured bodies should feel *more* uncomfortable, gets an unambiguous, whole-room laugh.

But it isn't simply that he's let us off the hook; something else has happened. When Lee drew attention to the audience's response – 'laughs over here, a smattering of applause, and then doubt spreading to the back corner' – this itself was already funny. Why should it be funny in and of itself that Lee calls attention to a laugh *not* happening? Saying something like 'not much of a laugh there' after a joke has fallen flat is a curiously effective trick, one to which many comedians resort during live performance. On tour, or on a month-long run at the Edinburgh Fringe, the comedian does the same 'show' again and again, the audience knows this, and the comedian knows they know this. A skilled performer might, therefore, switch in and out of 'the show' – break off to comment on how it is going, how other audiences have reacted differently, admit that the last bit was an ad-lib, that it didn't quite work, that the comedian will not try that again. It can be pleasurable, the feeling of acknowledgement, and the feeling of the singularity of *this*, this given moment of performance. But, arguably, this trick only works because of its tension with the conventionality, the impersonality of 'the show' that – we all know – goes on much the same night after night whether or not you or I are here. Sure, stand-up needs an audience, but that is not to say that *this* comedian needs *me*. And indeed, the gap between the implied audience (the notional, ideal or absolute audience or gig) and those of us here in this room can itself be exploited for comic purposes (and Stewart Lee in particular has become fond of telling audiences that they are less responsive, less clever, than crowds on previous nights of the tour).

But the way Lee does it in this particular instance is funny in a peculiar way.

Read it again:

And laughs over here, a smattering of applause,
and then doubt spreading to the back corner.

He is identifying the audience not only by their acoustic behavior, laughter and applause, but also something less tangible – doubt – but he is giving the doubt a shape, and using the idea of the doubt to call attention to the shape of the audience, the shape of the room.

I am reminded here of the strangely thingifying way that comedians habitually refer to a gathering of spectators as ‘the room’, a dynamic entity they may speak of ‘working’, ‘losing’ or ‘shaping’. As Dan Atkinson puts it, the aim is to have the audience ‘believing that they’re one lump’.⁵⁴ Could it be that the way Lee says ‘doubt spreading to the back corner’ is funny has to do with the very idea of being part of an audience, being identifiable not as ‘me’ but as one of many bodies combining as a ‘lump’? Is it this sense of a shape or form the edges of which are not ‘mine’, and over which I have little direct control, that makes me feel funny? And could it be that the position of audience is not only *impersonal* (it could have been anyone, I only happen to be the one sitting here, as one of the ‘bums on seats’), but somehow *thingifying*?

In some sense, identification is at stake, self-identification and identification of self amongst others. Riley, a great theorist of identification, writes, ‘Any act of identification is systematically askew, since I’m envisaging what I presume that I’m supposed, in the eyes of others, to really be. By a consent which I could not anyway withhold, I become a voyeur of myself in the guise of a such-and-such, recognising that I’m looking at what I must look like through refracting lenses.’⁵⁵ When we transfer this to the scene of stand-up, that word ‘consent’ is interesting. Because we have always already consented to whatever it is the comedian will do to us to make us laugh. At the scene of stand-up comedy, which is *not* a symmetrical encounter ‘looking at what I must look like’ means

⁵⁴ Quoted in Quirk, p. 228.

⁵⁵ Riley, *Words of Selves*, pp. 13-14.

looking at what 'we' must look like. Could it be, then, that the intense affective experience of spectating stand-up has something to do with how spectators imagine themselves as they *appear* – as this thing called 'audience' – and the comedian is the one who reflects it back to them – as the one separated off alone, with the microphone, the one who is in the position to observe this crowd-thing, and identify it out loud? Certainly, this is a particular sort of funny feeling that Lee generates in the next juncture of *90s Comedian*. He does a minute or so on Al Qaeda ('there's lots of good stories from the war against terror'), before turning his attention to what, with jarring flippancy, he calls 'this great book of, of trial transcripts, of American soldiers accused of human-rights abuses in, in Abu Ghraib'. And then, he begins to talk about the 'photographing of a naked, hooded, bound Iraqi civilian being dragged out of a cell, er, on his hands and knees'. Citing the defence mounted in court by the lawyer representing one of the accused soldiers, that the Iraqi was not dragged but was 'crawling of his own free will', Lee wonders, aloud, 'what it is that the naked, hooded, bound Iraqi civilian was crawling of his own free will towards?', before continuing:

I like to think he was crawling towards the notion of Western democracy. But obviously he was having some difficulty knowing which way to crawl, er, because of the hood, er, and because of the fact that he was approaching a palpably abstract concept.

Again, a mixed response from his audience, and again, Lee calls attention to this fact:

OK? So there's good laughs for that over here in this area, and those tail away towards that corner there.

But this time, he takes it further, cutting abruptly across the laugh with,

When it's late at night, there's a long set to get through, as I said, there isn't going to be time for me to work a mixed-ability room tonight. Now. So. Everybody over here

[indicating audience members sitting to the right of the stage]
 for the rest of the night, you're on board,
 you're going to be Team A, OK?
 And you won't mind if I don't play over here too much,
 I'm going to be mainly concentrating
 on Team F in that corner.

As he says this, indicating, vaguely, an area of the room, there is the kind of laughter that signals pleased consternation. By so naming parts of the audience, he is grading them as though they were pupils at school, pitting them in competition. What's more, he is implying that those in the corner are trailing by several grades: they are not the 'very good' Team B, nor even the 'satisfactory' Team C. They are Team *F*. *F* for 'fail'.

He then turns to addresses 'Team A':

we must do everything we can to make them feel comfortable
 and we will bring them along with us.
[pause]
 Don't laugh at them, don't even look at them, right?
 Look at me, Team A.
 Don't laugh at them, Team A.

As he says this, there *is* laughter, uproarious laughter, emanating from the area of the audience he is addressing, from 'Team A'. But that is not to say that those addressed, and thus identified, *as* Team A are not necessarily laughing *at* those identified as Team F, but at the fact that Lee has dared to divide and label his audience in such a blatant, reductive fashion. But, by saying 'don't laugh at them', Lee (mis)identifies their laughter as laughter that is caused by, and directed *at*, the other part of the audience. By negation he makes one part of the audience laugh at the other, and, by saying, 'don't even look at them', effectively exposes one part of the audience to the gaze of the other.

And then, turning to Team F, he says:

And I know this is weird, what's happening now,
 'cause you've thought,

‘Ooh, let’s go out and sit in the dark and judge someone’, right?
 But now you’re being judged and it feels strange, right,
 but don’t worry, you will...
 I will... you will not be...
 look, it’s fine, OK?

The audience’s response is so vociferous that it interrupts him. And, perhaps evidencing some confusion over whose action or perspective is at stake here, when his address breaks down it breaks down on pronouns, emphasizing the switching of perspective: ‘you will.... I will.... you will not be...’.

Is being named as Team F an insult that a spectator might *take personally*? From the evidence of the DVD, it seems that those in the Team F corner are laughing at least as uproariously as those elsewhere in the room, if not more. Arguably, the identity that is ‘Team F’ does not coincide perfectly with those people who happen to be in those seats. Instead, ‘Team F’ represents the imagined collective consciousness of ‘anyone who doesn’t like this’, a personification of ‘doubt in the room’. And indeed, feelings of discomfort, worry or confusion about the kinds of topics Lee is making jokes about may well have affected – in different ways and to differing degrees – *everyone* present, not just those unfortunate souls who happen to be sitting in the Team F area. This doubt is not funny in and of itself, but becomes funny when acknowledged, made spatial; an unsubtle reification of a subtle and complicated set of feelings.

It is worth mentioning that, as a viewer of the commercially released DVD, I watched Lee performing a highly polished version of *90s Comedian* to a crowd who were not only appreciative, but who knew they were being filmed. By Lee’s own account there were gigs during which the audience were much more starkly divided, and at which this would have played out differently. It is relevant, too, that this performance of *90s Comedian* took place in an arts venue, a black-box theatre studio. Lee makes reference to this fact at numerous moments: this the kind of venue that attracts a ‘niche’ crowd, people who might also go to the theatre, rather than, say, the Millennium Stadium around the corner, which might be frequented by the kind of people who enjoy watching Robbie Williams ‘dressing as a luminous skeleton’. By invoking Team F,

Stewart Lee does not just personify the resistance to the joke, but *caricatures* this resistance as belonging to someone who is not cultured enough to *appreciate* the joke.

So all I'm saying is, if you're...
It's OK not to like this,
but if you don't like it,
that means you're
the same as Robbie Williams.

For many of his critics, it is precisely this kind of self-declared elitism that makes Lee not only unfunny, but intolerable. A London-dwelling Oxford graduate *Observer* columnist with his own BBC2 programme pouring scorn upon those who he considers to be uncultured? For *Daily Telegraph* reviewer Dominic Cavendish, who walked out of a gig at the Leicester Square Theatre in November 2013, this was too much:

the first half-hour or so was beset by his own interruptions, as he took issue with our wrong-headed laughs, our lack of responsiveness, our failure to 'make connections' and our want of imagination in coming up with suggestions when asked to do so.

This review has become somewhat notorious – indeed, Lee has quoted onstage the most damning part of it, which reads,

If Lee had a shred of interest or insight into the working lives of other people, he'd realise that those who give up an evening at the end of a week to see him deserve his thanks not his toxic scorn.⁵⁶

Cavendish's critique hinges upon an expression of concern for everyday 'working people' who have invested their hard-earned money and their precious leisure time to be entertained rather than insulted. In identifying them as vulnerable to Lee's 'scorn', Cavendish is tacitly accepting Lee's apparent

⁵⁶ Dominic Cavendish, 'Why I Walked Out of a Stewart Lee Gig', *Daily Telegraph* (9 November 2013) <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/comedy/10437964/Why-I-walked-out-of-a-Stewart-Lee-gig.html>> [accessed 26 April 2016].

scornful appraisal of the audience: they *are indeed* 'wrong-headed' and lacking in imagination. In other words, *they are all Team F*, an undifferentiated and gullible constituency of 'everyday people' who need protection from the 'scorn' of the educated, elevated likes of Stewart Lee. With his demarcation of 'other people' with 'working lives', Cavendish also somehow implies that, unlike the people who go to see him, Lee is *not* a person who has to work. And, although he appears to be casting himself as their defender, Cavendish appears to be most baffled (and appalled) by the honest hardworking people's apparent *enjoyment* of Lee's treatment: he notes that 'For some reason' the crowd 'didn't mutiny at this sardonic onslaught', and even 'lapped up the abuse with an agreeable chortle'. I could go further in my deconstruction of this *Daily Telegraph* critic's stance, but, as a self-identifying member of Lee's typically Left-leaning, metro-elite audience I *would* do that, wouldn't I? I admit, Cavendish's critique usefully raises the question of how an audience might be described or identified, and how I, as a member of Lee's audience might describe or identify *myself*. And also, how it is that a crowd of people might find it enjoyable to be (or appear to be) insulted.

In order to work through these question of identification, I will return to 90s *Comedian*, and what remains, for me, the most genuinely uncomfortable moment of the entire show. Lee has returned to the thread about the trial of US soldiers accused of human-rights abuses in Abu Ghraib prison. He says,

Lynndie England was a female American soldier and she was photographed pointing and laughing at the naked genitals of hooded, bound Iraqis. And at her trial the judge intervened, rather unusually, and said that he wasn't convinced that Lynndie England knew what she was doing.

Now, I don't believe that, 'cause in my experience, when a woman points and laughs at a man's genitals, she's normally fully aware of the effect that will have.

[pause]

In my experience.

Especially if he's hooded and bound.

[pause]

In my experience.

[*breaks off*]

The laugh spreading into the, the Team F region for that, because it's a kind of bit of satire about the news, but it's got cocks in it as well.

So that helps to bring the whole room onside.

Could this in fact be the most ethically questionable joke in the entire show? Moving, as it does, from a reference to the shaming as torture of Iraqi prisoners, through a trivializing substitution of his own body (the 'shame' and 'exposure' of which he is willingly staging, for money), into what Lee himself calls, in a footnote to the transcript, 'a pathetic cock joke'.⁵⁷

I laughed at this joke. In fact, I still find it funny now, when I think about it. Does that, in some sense, render me a member of Lee's 'Team F' (in other words, have I failed the test that Lee has set for me)? Well, yes *and* no. Because Lee has not set a test so much as a trap disguised as a test. Lee successfully *makes* me laugh by saying the word 'cock', but I simultaneously laugh because I am appreciating that he has staged an instance in which it *appears* that I have laughed at 'cocks'. I am, it seems, *both* Team A and F, and neither. I was not high-mindedly laughing at the 'bit of satire about the news', but neither was I simply laughing at the idea of a penis, the mention of exposed genitals. That is, not until Lee *said the word* 'cocks', and then I was laughing. At play here too, is perhaps also a weaker variety of shame, remembered from Lee's earlier description of himself in the third-length floral-print hospital gown: the shame at *being seen* to have done something, intentionally, that you did not, and would not, do (at least, not intentionally). Because, as he does with the joke about the tea cosy working as a shop assistant in a branch of Currys in Wolverhampton, Lee sets me up to laugh at something, and then comments on the collective laugh as though 'we' had laughed at something different, something stupider. This is, crucially, a feeling that is, in part, *linguistic*. That is not to say it is not also physical: it might be named as a form of reification embarrassment emerging from the surprise of hearing a slang word for a penis; after we have

⁵⁷ Lee, *How I Escaped*, p. 185.

become inured to all those mentions of 'genitals', hearing the word 'cock' *makes a thing of it* again.

Although I definitely do not 'belong' to Team F, here I am, gamely laughing at the kind of pathetic cock joke that Lee makes it appear he has included solely for their low-minded pleasure. Because of the funny personification of Team F (as a Robbie-Williams-luminous-skeleton figure), even if I happen to be sitting in the 'Team F area', I might well be afforded the pleasure of laughing both *at* Team F and *as* Team F. I think this 'both-and' laughter is what people are thinking of when they describe what Lee is doing as 'meta-comedy'. This odd term is not necessarily useful to my own work, for my laugh is not a 'meta-laugh' (for how would such a thing be possible?); it is really my body that is laughing. That is not to say that I am not in some sense self-divided *in* my laugh. I laugh at the idea of Team F laughing at cocks in the same moment *as* laughing – in my surprise – at Lee's abrupt recourse to this base word, 'cocks'. I understand and enjoy the joke on more than one level at once and am, in part, laughing *at* the fact that I have been caught out.

But of course, I am writing this from the position of one who was not 'in the room' when those who happened to be sitting a particular corner of the room were named as 'Team F', and therefore my identification with this position is hypothetical, imaginary. Those who *did* 'happen' to be in the room, and to find themselves in the position of Team F were exposed to a gaze that was not hypothetical but actual. If and when I have been in the room when Lee has deployed similar room-dividing tactics – as I was at the Royal Festival Hall when Lee mocked the upper circle of 'Southbank Centre mailing list types', playing them off against the 'art students' who had paid a fiver to sit at the side of the stage – I have sometimes become aware of someone sitting next to me, stonily silent, not enjoying it at all, and this can make for awkwardness: I hear my own laugh, and I hear my laugh as it would be heard, and even though I am laughing because I *do* find it funny, if I imagine myself through refracting lenses, I also understand it is possible that I am laughing merely to *show* I get the joke.

Thus far, doing a certain sort of reading – that is, using the experience of having

been to see Stewart Lee to feel my way through the text's grammatical and syntactical joints, its positional power – has brought to light the surprisingly complex and ambiguous combination of linguistic affects elicited by an apparently minor moment in the show. What I wish to take forward from this is the sense in which – whether or not I am at the gig or reading a text of the gig afterwards – I am being *called* to the scene of address. That is, called as a body, parts embarrassingly reified, and subtly, the question of my personhood is called into play. Simultaneously, the question of my collective identification is raised. I am prompted to ask how I identify myself, or indeed, whether I am *able* to identify with the collectivized 'self' that is implied, perhaps expected of me, us, of 'we'.

6. Interpellation and the temporal strangeness of guilt

In his seminal essay 'Ideological State Apparatuses', Althusser names interpellation as the means by which ideology functions to turn individuals into 'subjects'. In the illustrative scenario Althusser sketches, a policeman hails a passerby with a cry of 'Hey, you there!'. The one who recognizes himself in that call turns around, and, 'By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*'.⁵⁸

Peter Bailey has deployed Althusser's concept to conceptualize direct address in the Victorian music hall. In Bailey's account, the audience of this early form of mass entertainment was formed of recent incomers to cities exponentially swelled by industrialization, a disparate crowd whose 'awareness of their shared experience had to be activated anew at every performance'. Just as interpellation is an 'ideological address or hailing that recruits individuals into a particular subject-role or identity', the music hall performer's direct address 'activates the corporate subjectivity of the crowd, and calls an audience into place'. With its 'affirmation of a newly urbanised people', music hall thus

⁵⁸ Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), p. 163.

represents the first instance of a mass entertainment audience.⁵⁹ Bailey's account of music hall offers a historical precedent for the convention of addressing the audience by the name of the venue or city in which a gig is taking place, and a way of thinking about the gigging performer's euphoric shout-out which, supposedly, *in* the moment of being called, pulls you into the collective excitement *of* 'the moment'.

On the basis of this model, interpellation appears to share its temporality with Austin's performative utterance – like the marriage ceremony's 'I do', the call or hail does its work 'in the moment' of being uttered, and on this basis, the interpellation could be named as a kind of performative utterance. The idea of the performative-interpellation is certainly suggestive in the context of the gig. After all, it's only a short leap from 'Hey you!' to a call like 'Hello Glastonbury!' or 'Thank you Wembley!' However, as Riley argues at length in *The Words of Selves*, the temporal logic of Althusser's concept of interpellation is trickier than this performative model would suggest. By offering this curiously memorable street scene, with its policeman and its passer-by and its one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn, it seems he has provided, as Riley notes, a 'powerfully distracting vignette'.⁶⁰ No sooner has he offered what he calls this 'little theoretical theatre' than he seeks to almost completely cancel it out:

But in reality, these things happen without any succession. The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing. I might add: what seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise, in the street) in reality takes place in ideology.⁶¹

What was, at first, exemplified as a 'call' or 'hail' that sounded in a given place and time, and described a relation between bodies, is actually not a sequence, not something that can be observed to 'take place', but a condition that is to be understood as 'always already' in play. As Riley notes, Althusser's qualifications, in effect, obliterate the scene. The timing of the turn is erased, as

⁵⁹ Bailey, p. 133.

⁶⁰ Riley, *Words of Selves*, p. 79.

⁶¹ Althusser, 'Ideology', p. 169.

'interpellation and subjection both happen in one and the same blow', and actually there is 'no balletic spinning round, and no outdoors either'.⁶² It is difficult to grasp the strange temporality of this 'idea of the simultaneity of the subject's interpellation with its recognition of its place', which 'under the logic of grammar, seems implausible.'⁶³ And, as Riley observes, it is not just the *timing* of the street scene that is confusing; there is something odd about the scene itself. For, if you spend any amount of time really thinking it through, you might quibble, as Riley does, that 'any half-competent villain would refuse the temptation to glance round but would carry on purposefully walking'.⁶⁴ But, *in theory*, interpellation is, Althusser maintains, a call that always gets it right':

Experience shows that the practical telecommunications of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognises that it is really him who is being hailed.⁶⁵

In Althusser's model, the policeman's 'Hey, you there!' is not a friendly greeting; it is an accusation. It presupposes guilt. If a well-practised criminal, knowing how to dodge the call, would carry on walking, then we might consider that the 'one' who turns around is perhaps a person (like me or you) who *fears* being accused or something or other, even if we know (or think we know) we are *not* guilty of any crime. As Althusser himself reflects, interpellation 'is a strange phenomenon, and one which cannot be explained solely by "guilt feelings" despite the large numbers who "have something on their consciences"'.⁶⁶ Althusser calls interpellation 'strange', and indeed, the abundance of scare-quotes in his text suggests that there is something strange going on, a strangeness that seems to hover around the question of guilt. And indeed, the street scene is accompanied by a scare-quote-ridden footnote, which reads: 'Hailing as an everyday practice subject to a precise ritual takes a quite "special" form in the policeman's practice of "hailing" which concerns the hailing

⁶² Riley, *Words of Selves*, p. 78.

⁶³ Riley, *Words of Selves*, p. 83.

⁶⁴ Riley, *Words of Selves*, p. 79.

⁶⁵ Althusser, 'Ideology', p. 163.

⁶⁶ Althusser, 'Ideology', p. 163.

of “suspects”⁶⁷.

Riley, reading Althusser's text at the level of its 'grammatical and syntactical joints,' the 'pervasive level of its musculature', suggests that his 'famous adverbial adjective' [...] “always already” with its strange-but-true-temporality, in itself possesses a shading of guilt'. She goes on to argue that the apparent contradictions of the street scene should not be overlooked as errors, for 'Althusser, knowing all about the temporal strangeness embedded in his theory, had deliberately made it integral to his polemic'. For the temporal structure of guilt itself is, as Riley's puts it, 'bizarre'. Guilt 'can precede some wrongdoing which may never be enacted; it can often be an anticipating emotion' (and on this point she differentiates it from shame); you can feel guilty for something you have not done, something that you are relieved not to have yet done. Or you can feel guilty in some general, unplaceable way and try to work out what it is you *must* have done. The timing of guilt is itself, 'always already'; guilt is 'the emotion that runs in advance of the deed and is always primed to be activated'⁶⁸.

Whilst declaring herself cautious of psychoanalytic readings of the author himself, Riley finds productive models for guilt's temporal strangeness in Althusser's own life story, which he tells in his autobiography *The Future Lasts a Long Time*. According to Riley,

Incidents of quietly paranoiacal guilt pack his story as responses to real or imagined accusations; so the couple of noisy shots fired among a noisy crowd at a sports stadium, into which he and his father had slipped without paying for their tickets, were, he half-imagined, actually meant for him.⁶⁹

Riley takes from the story of the bullets fired into the crowd a metaphor for the feeling of a verbal accusation: whether or not it was, you might well feel it was

⁶⁷ Althusser, 'Ideology', p. 163.

⁶⁸ Riley, *Words of Selves*, p. 83. See also Louis Althusser, *The Future Lasts a Long Time* trans.by Richard Veasy (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993).

⁶⁹ This is Riley's retelling, in *Words of Selves*, p. 81. For the original, see Althusser, *Future*, p. 46.

aimed at you. Imagine the scene: a speaker is addressing a crowd or a group with some generalized disquisition on people who are, say, habitually late for meetings, or don't turn up to parties for spurious reasons. Your feeling of prior guilt might lead you to reflect (either silently or out loud): 'Was that aimed at me?' Such a thought might be dismissed as paranoid, or egotistical, but it brings the question of the *linguistic form* of the interpellation into play. For an interpellation to work you would have to believe it was *aimed* at you; whether or not it was, there may be something inherent in the linguistic form of the interpellation that feels accusative, feels *personal* in this way. It may be that Althusser's theory strikes a chord because of 'the usual effect of being accused: to be made to feel guilty, irrespective of whether or not you actually are'.⁷⁰ Thus, the timing of guilt, is always already; it is 'the emotion that runs in advance of the deed and is always primed to be activated'.⁷¹

How are these rather unhappy scenes related to the scene of the stand-up gig, the scene of joking? A joke is, after all, according to John Limon's summation of Freud, an escape to 'a prior *happiness*'⁷². What would an always-already primed guiltiness have to do with it? Whether or not guilt is actually in play at the scene of the gig, I do think an understanding of the scene of a Stewart Lee gig in particular can draw something from the models provided by Riley's reading of Althusser. The Althusserian narrative of guilt certainly offers a different, less heartwarming take on the idea of the spectator feeling like the comedian is speaking to them in a 'one-on-one' manner; the feeling that an utterance addressed to a crowd might actually be intended for you and you alone is not necessarily a happy one. I must admit that I find this anecdote about Althusser as the guilt-ridden boy in a packed stadium even more compelling than the famous scene of the policeman's 'Hey, you!' Perhaps it *gets* me (and thus in some sense seems *aimed* at me) because it relates to a scene of gathering, and the feeling of being in a crowd, and yet, somehow, not wholly 'in' it.

⁷⁰ Riley, *Words of Selves*, p. 84.

⁷¹ Riley, *Words of Selves*, p. 83.

⁷² Limon, *Stand-Up*, p. 12, emphasis added.

As I have already intimated via my earlier recourse to 'verbal embarrassment', Riley's thoughts about *linguistic feelings* are apposite to Stewart Lee's stand-up performances. For, offers Riley, there may be a 'linguistics of guilt to be distinguished from a psychology of guilt'.⁷³ Recall, if you will, from my Introduction, an evocation of the weird feeling of lying when you aren't. In anecdotal form, it runs something like: you feel poorly; you can't go to the party and so telephone the host to explain. As you give your reasons, as well as feeling guilty for disappointing her, you feel like you are lying. You put the phone down and think, 'maybe I'm *not* ill?'. Whereas in this case, a psychoanalyst would diagnose *unconscious* guilt (you didn't really *want* to go in the first place), Riley suggests the discomfort has to do with the linguistic formula of the excuse itself. This 'possesses the overarching structure of a lie, irrespective of whether or not it happens on this occasion to be true'.⁷⁴ Similarly, an accusation, or any sort of 'critical interpellation', 'with its syntactical structure of an attack', might be thought to 'automatically produce a reflex guiltiness'.⁷⁵

Riley is careful to clarify that she suggested that *some*, not all, guilt is linguistic, but she draws productive inferences from the idea of this *kind* of guilt. Her thoughts relate to the possibility of failed interpellation. Can interpellation, with its accusatory structure, be refused? You might respond with a 'But I...', as in: 'But actually I'm not a criminal, not guilty'. To refuse the interpellation could grant a small relief. But, the inverse phenomenon, which may be less reassuring, is that of feeling as if an interpellation, although *aimed* in your general direction, has *not quite worked*. This relates to the feeling of being an imposter, which, Riley suggests, 'could be recognised as not so rare or pathological at all, but as itself immanently generated as feeling by the everyday machinations of interpellative language'.⁷⁶ The person who 'may hesitate because she can't authentically enter in to an attribution, can't internalise it' may *also* feel guilty. This is what Riley identifies as 'linguistic guilt', associated with 'an inescapable failure to thoroughly *be*', the feeling that you

⁷³ Riley, *Words of Selves*, p. 85.

⁷⁴ Riley, *Impersonal Passion*, pp. 91-2.

⁷⁵ Riley, *Words of Selves*, p. 84.

⁷⁶ Riley, *Words of Selves*, p. 85.

'can't quite either be or not be in the collective category, can't coincide with it or easily escape it'.⁷⁷ That may well involve 'a demurral, a discomfort, or a guilt which is linguistic'.⁷⁸

7. Always already

If, as we have seen, the way Lee addresses his audience can mobilize (perhaps inadvertently) feelings of linguistic embarrassment, and odd moments of disassociation or disjuncture between what you feel you *are* and how you seem to be being described, or labeled, what part if any does linguistic guilt play in this scene? The answer brings us back to the question of the social make-up of Lee's audience. As Sharpe, Dewsbury and Hynes note in their article on the 'micropolitical interventions' of Stewart Lee, the kinds of people who go to see Stewart Lee live, and who identify themselves as 'Stewart Lee's audience' are 'characteristically Left-leaning'.⁷⁹ We might also speculate that they are the kind of people who might read the *Observer* (in which Lee has a regular column), would typically be in favour of state subsidy for many things, including the arts, and who support these non-commercial cultural activities by attending. It might be added that Lee's audience also includes the kinds of people who work as academics in universities and write admiring articles about Lee's 'micropolitical interventions'. All of this is another way of saying that Lee's typical audience are people who might well have internalized that curious linguistic code based on the morality of pronouns, according to which the 'we' is always positive. This base-level collective identification is the requisite for political action, *and* an acknowledgement of shared responsibility for the inequalities upon which their comfortable lives (that include fun things like going to see stand-up comedy) are built – a colonial past, a continuing over-exploitation of world resources, an economy that requires and perpetuates structural inequalities of various kinds. When the prerequisite for inclusion in the 'we' is the shouldering of *shared* guilt, you – yes, *you*, the one identified via that 'superfluous' second-person pronoun

⁷⁷ Riley, *Words of Selves*, p. 85.

⁷⁸ Riley, *Words of Selves*, p. 2.

⁷⁹ Sharpe, Dewsbury and Hynes, p. 118.

– might find yourself feeling guilty for feeling the wrong sort of guilt. Your personal private guilt not quite coinciding with the public societal guilt, not feeling authentic, feeling, perhaps, a little bit too linguistic, quibbling over pronouns, feeling strange about grammar. As Riley notes, 'to back away from something so apparently reasonable as a liberal self-indictment can produce a stubborn wilfulness and a guilt that one can't wholeheartedly sign up for a club [...] a guilt at refusing guilt'.⁸⁰

We are moving towards understanding of what it feels like to be 'in' Stewart Lee's audience as having to do with a weird ethico-political negotiation of a compacted array of guilt-feelings. Guilt that is linguistic, guilt that is liberal, guilt *about* guilt. In order to see how this plays out at the scene of the gig, I wish to return to what remains, for me, the most genuinely uncomfortable part of *90's Comedian*: Lee's references to the human rights abuses at Abu Ghraib prison.

Lee names Lynndie England as one of the soldiers put on trial (earlier he also named another, Charles Graner). He details her crime, and in the process invokes an image of a 'female American soldier photographed pointing and laughing at the naked genitals of hooded, bound Iraqis'. And then he displaces this disturbing scene via a recourse to his 'own' experience and (thus his own body, his own genitals, implying they are being mocked by the gaze of an unimpressed woman, perhaps invoking a vague memory of the disparaging nurse from the earlier anecdote of exposure). Finally, he renders this doubtful, not quite funny segue resoundingly funny by switching back to the strand of 'bringing Team F along' (thus revealing that the entire vignette was *staged* precisely for this purpose). When the reference to (and evocation of) the human rights abuses gives way to a 'pathetic cock joke', and discomfort gives way to laughter, a complicated negotiation over guilt and identification is taking place. Different kinds of guilt are getting confused with one another: an admission or declaration of guilt that is public and necessary (the soldier held to account by due process), guilt that is personal and confused (the feeling of somehow having taken part in the abuse just by thinking of the image of it), and guilt that

⁸⁰ Riley, *Words of Selves*, p. 85.

is somehow *itself* guilty (the guilty pleasure of laughing at a cock joke).

So much for guilt, what of shame? As Limon has argued in a recent article, Abu Ghraib is frequently discussed in terms of shame, and can be understood as the exploitation of a culturally specific notion of shame as a weapon of war: the shaming-as-torture, and the greater shame *of* torture.⁸¹ Do I, as a member of Lee's 'impeccably liberal minded audience', feel in some way ashamed of, guilty about, or responsible for the human rights abuses Lee is describing? If I do, it is in a confused way, complicated by the fact that I am negotiating these feelings whilst watching a stand-up comedian say things that are, I am aware, intended, above all, to make me laugh.

And I *did* laugh, I laughed at 'cocks'. And the surprise reflex of laughing suddenly means that it may be more accurate to say *I had laughed*, already, at the pathetic cock joke, and then before I had time to disentangle the confusion Lee generated about what it was I was actually laughing at, he had already moved on to the next joke. My laugh is taken from me, revealed not to have been 'mine' so much as a predictable and conventionalized response to something Lee had planned in advance. The localised guilt of a named individual is set in tension with the more dispersed guilt of a crowd showing themselves to be capable of being collectively manipulated into laughing at a stupid, tasteless joke. The temporal logic of this is strange: we are *guilty* not of laughing, but of *having laughed*. Perhaps what Riley names linguistic guilt, with its temporal strangeness, can be rendered funny precisely by *timing*? That is not to say that laughing at, in spite of or as a result of this guilt-feeling gets me out of it. For, throughout *90s Comedian*, the complex and strange temporality of the jokes do not just make me laugh; they produce a feeling of being *implicated*. Always already implicated.

In the defining move of her argument, Riley notes, 'we should also remember the guilt attendant on a too-easy enrolment in the ranks of those making their

⁸¹ John Limon, 'The Shame of Abu Ghraib', *Critical Inquiry*, 33:3 (2007), 543-572.

confessions',⁸² and suggests that 'a more helpful politics will recognise a useful provisionality in the categories of social being'.⁸³ Accordingly, if we can accept that 'hesitations in inhabiting a category are neither psychological weaknesses nor failures of authenticity or solidarity', we might begin to work out how 'mutating identifications, sharpened by the syntactical peculiarities of self-description's passage to collectivity, decisively mark the workings of political language'.⁸⁴ In light of this, is it plausible to suggest that rather than straightforwardly 'working the room', Lee is doing something that allows us to appraise the 'workings of political language' – that is, not talking *about* politics so much as staging it, through his addressive practices? Might Lee's stand-up comedy, indeed, have to do less with 'catharsis', and more with what Riley calls 'mutating identifications'? Certainly, as I have discovered in the course of my discussion, tracing the various shifts within the way Lee addresses his audience certainly reveals a play upon 'the syntactical peculiarities of self-description's passage to collectivity'.

When such questions are at stake, perhaps a scene of mediated spectatorship, such as that of my friend Holly and I watching *90's Comedian* in a room in a house in North London in 2009, is not a bad place to embark upon a meditation upon the ethics and affective politics of the 'direct address'. As I have stated, in an age in which we carry them around in our bags and our pockets, screens have become 'personal'. Perhaps that is why a certain kind of straight-into-the-camera address *feels like* it is, for me and me alone. At the start of the *90's Comedian* DVD, Lee looks directly into the camera and speaks as if to me. And he tells me 'if you need to go for a wee...', thus in some sense calling my body to his scene of address. And yet, in the same gesture, he also reminds me that, although he has anticipated my act of spectating, the actions of my body are not something that he could either see, or fully anticipate. He tells me it's OK if I need to go to the toilet, he says 'I won't even know that it's happening, literally'. And, oddly, by reminding me that I am not in a position to be 'literally' exposed by either his address, or his gaze, Lee *does* remind me that, by comporting his

⁸² Riley, *Words of Selves*, pp. 85-6.

⁸³ Riley, *Words of Selves*, p. 1.

⁸⁴ Riley, *Words of Selves*, p. 1.

body to me, he *is* in some sense also exposing *my* body. This address reminds me that my body, although not present at the scene, remains vulnerable to address. By referring to my body, he is calling attention to that which is most unknown to me, and in doing so he reminds me that I have a body with which to act in, and upon the world. By reminding me that I act in this 'future', in ways that *his* act cannot fully anticipate, he raises the question of my agency, and my responsibility. He is, in effect, making me ask myself what it is that *I* will do now.

CONCLUSION

This thesis started out from a vague and yet easily imagined scene of address, an exemplary scene in which one person stands up on a stage and speaks to a gathering of persons. In this conclusion, I wish to stage one final exemplary scene of speech, one that will bring this discussion into focus alongside one of the key problematics that has emerged during the writing of this thesis: the problem not only of the first-person, but of *my* first-person. The problem of my inclusion, my implicatedness in the scenes about which I am writing.

At a certain moment within the second episode of the first series of his BBC2 programme, Lee turns to look directly into the camera, which is behind him onstage. The stage in question is at the Mildmay Social Club in North London, where Lee performs stand-up in front of a live audience. He also, frequently, turns to the camera in order to 'directly address' those viewers who are watching at home. In this instance, his tone is accusatory. He says:

I'll tell you what I don't understand about you,
 [*looking directly into camera, close up*]
 right, thanks for watching, but... what is it that you want?
 The public.
 [*turning to the live audience*] not you, you're good people aren't you,
 you've come out to see live entertainment.
 But [*turning back to camera*]
 you people
 you people at home – *not them* [*pointing to live audience*]
 look at them!
 But [*looking into camera*] you...
 you, [*pointing*] you.
 Not them, they're here!
 You.¹

¹ 'Television', *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle*, BBC2, 23 May 2009, 10pm.

This scene of address is of interest for several reasons. Firstly, and most obviously, it reanimates many of the affective peculiarities of the 'direct address' that were active in the previous chapter, but does so in a way that brings the question of mediated versus 'live' spectatorship more sharply into focus. Lee is, once again, dividing his audience into two parts and playing them off against one another, exposing one to the gaze of the other. But here, instead of the division being drawn *within* the stand-up room, he is playing the live audience off against the televisual one. Each is, alternately, the object of his direct address, his 'you': the way he switches between the two is funny in a way that feels almost quite physical, but also strongly and peculiarly grammatical. When Lee looks into the camera, the way he says '*you*' makes it function almost like a single-word accusation. If Riley is right, when interpellation works it does so on the basis of a prior guilt, which is always primed to be activated by an utterance that takes the form of an accusation, whether or not it was aimed at you.

I watched this episode at home. I was thus positioned to be the target of Lee's accusatory *you*. I was not there, in the Mildmay Social Club. I was thus not, according to Lee, one of the 'good people' who had 'come out to see live entertainment'. And yet, on the other hand, as someone who has chosen to make performance my lifelong profession (not least by writing a PhD thesis about Stewart Lee from a department of drama), I *am also* one of those 'good people' who is committed to going out to see live entertainment. Just not on that night. On that night I was at home, watching the television. By circumstance, it seemed, on that particular night, I could put myself in the position of *both* and *neither* of Stewart Lee's 'yous': I was not at the live performance, and yet I was, and remain, the *sort of person who might be*.

I have allowed myself this final exemplary vignette because at play within it are some of the key problematics of my thesis project as it reaches its conclusion. The differentiation that Lee is (or appears to be) making, between the 'good people' who go out to see live performance, and the (by implication) 'bad people' who do not, reflects values that might be thought of as implicit within the

very activity of performance studies. It also reanimates some of the anxieties that came to light in Chapter Two's extended reflection upon the perceived 'unhealthy inwardness' of reading as opposed to the healthy fresh air of 'public events'. And it makes it necessary, once again, to ask a question about the methodology of this study. For, having, in the early pages of this thesis, set out my concern as having to do with the speaking body at the scene of performance, I have proceeded to conduct my enquiries primarily by writing about speaking (or else stubbornly mute) bodies imagined through reading, or viewed on screens: I read J.L. Austin's lectures, and imagined what it *might* have been like to watch him say the words; finding myself unable to relax at a Stewart Lee gig, I went home and reread the transcript of his tea cosy routine; I watched Kinkaleri's *I Cenci/Spettacolo* on a DVD in my living room at home. And, in the final chapter of the thesis, I returned to Stewart Lee, this time modeling the scene of spectating 90's *Comedian* on DVD in dialogue (and in tension) with remembered experiences of gig-going.

It is possible to argue, on an immediate and practical level, that there is an element of necessity in the methodologies I have adopted and developed in these chapters. As Chapter Two and Chapter Four have demonstrated, Stewart Lee's stand-up performance proceeds via a complex and shifting address structure, and it is simply not possible to give an account of the linguistic particularities brought into play without returning (and returning) to a mediation of some sort. Although it would be possible to 'do a Derrida' and argue that, since it depends upon pre-existing linguistic convention Lee's staged utterance is necessarily (and at times fairly overtly) citational, I am not going to suggest that my kind of readerly, mediated spectatorship is a *more* apposite approach to his work than 'being there' at the gig. Although my methods have, I argue, produced valuable knowledge about Lee's work, and about the performativity of speech when it is performed, I now think it is time, not to put too fine a point on it, that I got out of this room. My hope is that my work here, which draws upon a necessarily restricted palette, will provide the critical groundwork for thinking through further and more diverse spectatorial engagements.

However, although it is possible to glance at this thesis, register its range of

cases as running from 'Stewart Lee' to 'Kinkaleri (on DVD)' and think 'restricted palette', staging the question of what, exactly, constitutes a 'case' might just be the key intervention of this thesis. For are not the lectures of J.L. Austin, the conversational stalls of Shannon Jackson, or the interjections of Edith Bunker also 'cases'? Cannot the story, or the joke, of the brick that travelled to Germany on Ryanair also be considered to function here as a case (one that happened to, literally, *be in* a case)? Reading across and between these chapters, it becomes apparent that this thesis stages a set of mutually informative, and at times mutually disruptive exchanges between modes of engagement with, and between registers of discourse about, exemplary scenes of speech.

Acknowledging the presence of the microphone in many of the exemplary scenes of direct address to which this thesis returns prompted a consideration of its place within a particular historical and economic context, and its importance to a number of key artistic and theoretical discussions around 'postmodernism'. However, the emphasis of my work in this respect has been theoretical rather than historical. The stakes of this enquiry have to do not with historical detail, but with encouraging (or perhaps tricking) various interlocutors to speak to one another in new ways. This has entailed placing texts in relationships that might at first seem odd, jarring, or downright irreverent. After all, to say that I am reading Stewart Lee with Paul de Man might, in itself, sound like some sort of joke. One of the most productive things to emerge from the juxtaposition of 'high' theory with what de Man calls (perhaps mockingly) 'the sub-literature of mass entertainment' is the observation that what is often called the 'direct address' of stand-up in fact operates via a complex and shifting play of *figures of address*.

Through its extended engagement with the work of Stewart Lee, this thesis has produced a particular sort of knowledge about the performance practice of direct address, and by extension, about speech more generally. This proceeds from the observation what is going on during Lee's direct address is a kind of *figuring* of the audience. During his performances, Lee addresses the people gathered at his gigs *as if* are this or that *kind* of audience, or person, or thing.

This makes it feel, at certain moments, and in a peculiar way, like the people who do happen to be there are somehow *not really there*, and that Lee is speaking to an imaginary figure that he himself has created, and spoken into being. On this basis, we might conjecture that, on some level, 'Stewart Lee's audience' is nothing more than a literary effect, an imagined, metaphorical presence, a figural entity, spoken into being by Stewart Lee himself. And certainly, it might be said that 'Glasgow' or 'Cardiff' or 'Stewart Lee's audience' in an expanded sense figure in *this* text in a purely figurative way: I have made no efforts toward ethnographic fieldwork here, nor does my study employ sociological methods. Some may consider this a failing, for does it not grant too much authority to what it is that Stewart Lee says about (and to, and on behalf of) his audience, denying the spectators their agency, and in some more fundamental sense, their personhood? Perhaps, but the terms of this enquiry prompt me to ask, in response, whether it is possible to posit knowledge about a either a localized gathering of spectators, or an audience in the wider sense, that does *not* in some sense rely upon some sort of personification.

As Riley suggests, the feeling of being an imposter, that 'inescapable failure to thoroughly *be*' might usefully be thought of as 'not so rare or pathological at all, but as itself immanently generated as feeling by the everyday machinations of interpellative language'.² Against this backdrop, it becomes possible to argue that there may be something not only pleasurable, but also politically useful, about being offered the chance to spectate your own objectification as a linguistic, perhaps a literary effect. There is a funny sort of pleasure in feeling your 'self' and its actions taken out of your own control, narrated back to you as *though you were* the 'you' Lee is addressing. In political terms, Lee's work might be offering a way to *enjoy* the non-coincidence of the me-personally and the we-collectively; because it gives an opportunity to see how identification and misidentification works in funny ways, and because it hypostatizes this collectivism and shows it to be not the wholly 'good' thing various political movements (and the more general and dispersed *feeling* of self-identifying as someone 'on the left') assume it to be. Rather, the 'we' (the 'good people') are

² Riley, *Words of Selves*, p. 85.

just as capable of petty-mindedness, laughing at stupid cock jokes, distracted and uncertain about what's right and not, and liable to be duped by linguistic game-playing, as the patchily engaged, questionably intentioned, opaque and changeable individual. Far from this being a sign of the hopelessness of the situation, the failure of the political will of 'the people', I'm wondering whether it might be precisely the feeling of being positioned, spoken across, rendered passive, not being able to answer back, and – more peculiarly – being identified with and as a position or identity that you know is not *identical* with your own, but may at certain moments *coincide* uncomfortably with what you think you might be, or should be, or *might be seen to be*, is key to the pleasure of spectating Stewart Lee's stand-up. Yes, interpellation, understood as the process by which 'authority anchors itself in those it addresses',³ is a serious business. But, as Lee's work demonstrates, it can also be shown to be funny *by* being shown to be happening. And, I argue that a project that seeks to get at the *ethics* of speech as it acts upon and through us within a particular set of social, historical and political contexts, very much needs to take this *pleasure* into account.

In this thesis, my distinctive way of reading the relational ethics developed by Judith Butler, Adriana Cavarero and Denise Riley, has led me to suggest that there is a type of funniness that is inherent in the body that stands in front of another body and says 'I...'. The inherent funniness of speech has to do with what Felman so productively termed the incongruous interrelation of speech and a body. Crucially, within this model, the funniness of the speaking body is not necessarily to be thought of as something the body is *doing*. Yes, it is possible to develop tactics of mobilizing, this funniness, and exploit it, perhaps for professional purposes, as Lee's successful career attests. But, crucially, a body can only become visible within a given socio-historical context. This context renders certain kinds of bodies differently visible, and therefore funny, or unfunny, in a number of politicized ways.

To a certain extent, in this context, the funniness of Stewart Lee has to do with

³ Riley, *Words of Selves*, p. 86.

his appearance, on stage, *as a man*. A certain kind of man. Lee's audience, Left-leaning and impeccably liberal minded as they (or we) are (or like to think, or need to believe, we are) are liable to find *this* man-body funny, because he can stand as, and make fun of, a certain kind of man – a man *like* on Top Gear or *the same* as Robbie Williams. The kind of man who is a member of the establishment, more or less still dominant on television and in the media and in spheres of public communication and speech – in parliament, in the law courts, in the pulpit, on the various concrete situations of the 'public stage'. And arguably, to look at this body as it is exposed and rendered funny and to a certain extent shamed and humiliated is not only bearable, but becomes enjoyably funny, in ways that it would not be to watch another kind of body humiliate 'itself' in these sorts of ways.

In this thesis I have been drawn to the moments at which Lee seems like he does not want to be onstage, has been 'put' there, on display – an object of display, a thing that speaks. Those moments at which the funniness of his performance has less to do with something he is *doing*, than with the way his bodily appearance, presence, is being staged, shown to be out of his control. This is where my interest in work like Kinkaleri's *I Cenci/Spettacolo* comes into play, because there is a kind of bodily funniness that the two kinds of work share – that is, the stand-up of Stewart Lee and many of the works of performance that have shaped recent understandings of postmodern theatricality. This funniness has to do with a half-heartedness or reluctance in the performance, as though the performer were 'acting' only under some kind of compulsion. In light of my work in this thesis, I have begun to understand the sort of funniness that emanates from a body that is undertaking an act of standing, speaking, performing, with a stubborn or else a humiliated sort of reluctance. This wilful crapness, the *weakness* of the attempt, can, it seems, be understood in a historical way; against, that is, the history of aesthetics, and against a materialist history of the conditions of production in 'a world fundamentally rent by the division of labour'.⁴

⁴ Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 18.

We might think of this weakness as manifest in moments at which we are faced with the palpable failure of the body standing onstage to inhabit the role – not a theatrical role so much as the role of a person authorized to speak in public. It might be said that all of the examples I examine in this thesis emanate from the work of people who are attuned to something of the funniness of standing up in front of other people and speaking. From J.L. Austin to Kinkaleri, via Stewart Lee, these bodies are, in a funny way, engaged in performances of their own reluctance, or inability, to fully embody the heroic gesture of self-assertion required to underwrite their act of speech, their ‘stand-up’ activity.

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