NINE

REITERATING THE DIFFERENCES: A REPLY TO DERRIDA[1]

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IT WOULD BE a mistake, I think, to regard Derrida's discussion of Austin as a confrontation between two prominent philosophical traditions. This is not so much because Derrida has failed to discuss the central theses in Austin's theory of language, but rather because he has misunderstood and misstated Austin's position at several crucial points, as I shall attempt to show, and thus the confrontation never quite takes place.

His paper divides naturally into two parts: In the first part he discusses writing and its relation to context and communication. In the second, applying various of the conclusions of the first part, he discusses some features of Austin's theory of speech acts. He concludes with a discussion of the role of signatures. In my reply I will not attempt to deal with all or even very many of the points he raises, but will concentrate on those that seem to me to the most important and especially on those where I disagree with his conclusions. I should say at the outset that I did not find his arguments very clear and it is possible that I may have misinterpreted him as profoundly as I believe he has misinterpreted Austin.

I. WRITING, PERMANENCE, AND ITERABILITY

In the first part he mounts an attack on the idea of writing as the communication of intended meaning. The argument is that since writing can and must be able to function in the radical absence of the sender, the receiver, and the context of production, it cannot be the communication of the sender's meaning to the receiver. Since my writing can continue to function after I and all my intended readers are dead, and since the context of the writing may be totally forgotten or unknown, the horizon of communication is not the communication of consciousnesses or presences nor is it the transport of the intended meaning (*vouloir dire*) of the author. "My communication must be repeatable—iterable—in the absolute absence of the receiver or of any empirically determinable collectivity of receivers" (pp. 179–80).

He then extends this discussion to the "classical concept" of writing about which he argues that the differentiating features that the classical concept attributes to writing are generalizable. Indeed, they are "valid not only for all orders of 'signs' and for all languages in general but moreover, beyond semio-linguistic communication, for the entire field of what philosophy would call experience . . ." (p. 181). This conclusion is then in turn used to support his general attack on the idea of communication as the communication of intended meanings. His claim is that the three essential features in the classical conception of writing—that writing remains (*reste*) after its inscription, that it has "*une force de rupture*" with its context of production, and that it has an "*espacement*" which constitutes the written sign—are to be found in all language because of the *iterability* of linguistic elements. Iterability looms large in both of these arguments, and I will have more to say about it later.

In order to get at what is wrong with these arguments let us begin by asking what is it exactly that distinguishes written from spoken language. Is it iterability, the repeatability of the linguistic elements? Clearly not. As Derrida is aware, any linguistic element written or spoken, indeed any rule-governed element in any system of representation at all must be repeatable, otherwise the rules would have no scope of application. To say this is just to say that the logician's type-token distinction must apply generally to all the rule-governed elements of language in order that the rules can be applied to new occurrences of the phenomena specified by the rules. Without this feature of iterability there could not be the possibility of producing an infinite number of sentences with a finite list of elements; and this, as philosophers since Frege have recognized, is one of the crucial features of any language.

Is it absence, the absence of the receiver from the sender? Again,

clearly not. Writing makes it possible to communicate with an absent receiver, but it is not necessary for the receiver to be absent. Written communication can exist in the presence of the receiver, as for example, when I compose a shopping list for myself or pass notes to my companion during a concert or lecture.

No doubt it would be possible to specify many features which distinguish writing from spoken utterances—for example, writing is visual and speaking is aural—but for the purposes of this discussion the most important distinguishing feature is the (relative) permanence of the written text over the spoken word. Even in an era of tape recordings and record playing machines, the primary device for preserving utterances is the written (or printed) word. This relative permanence in turn allows for both the absence of the receiver and, equally important, the accumulation of linguistic acts in an extended text. I can read an author's words after he has died, and even while he is alive he himself cannot tell me the entire contents of all his books, only his books can do that. Now the first confusion that Derrida makes, and it is important for the argument that follows, is that he confuses iterability with the permanence of the text. He thinks the reason that I can read dead authors is because their works are repeatable or iterable. Well, no doubt the fact that different copies are made of their books makes it a lot easier, but the phenomenon of the survival of the text is not the same as the phenomenon of repeatability: the type-token distinction is logically independent of the fact of the permanence of certain tokens. One and the same text (token) can be read by many different readers long after the death of the author, and it is this phenomenon of the permanence of the text that makes it possible to separate the utterance from its origin, and distinguishes the written from the spoken word.

This confusion of permanence with iterability lies at the heart of his argument for assimilating features of the written text with features of spoken words. He writes, "This structural possibility of being weaned from the referent or from the signified (hence from communication and from its context) seems to me to make every mark, including those which are oral, a grapheme in general; which is to say, as we have seen, the non-present *remainder* [*restance*] of a differential mark cut off from its putative 'production' or origin" (p. 183).

But there is an ambiguity in this argument that is fatal to its validity. The way in which a written text is weaned from its origin is quite different from the way in which any expression can be severed from its meaning through the form of "iterability" that is exemplified by quotation. The two phenomena operate on quite different principles. The principle according to which we can wean a written text from its origin

is simply that the text has a permanence that enables it to survive the death of its author, receiver, and context of production. This principle is genuinely "graphematic." But the principle according to which quotation (citation) allows us to consider an expression apart from its meaning is simply this: since any system of representation must have some representing devices whether marks, sounds, pictures, etc., it is always possible to consider those devices quite apart from their role in representation. We can always consider words as just sounds or marks[2] and we can always construe pictures as just material objects. But again this possibility of separating the sign from the signified is a feature of any system of representation whatever; and there is nothing especially graphematic about it at all. It is furthermore quite independent of those special features of the "classical concept" of writing which are supposed to form the basis of the argument. The type-token distinction, together with the physical realization of the signs makes quotation possible; but these two features have nothing to do with previously mentioned special features of graphemes. I conclude that Derrida's argument to show that all elements of language (much less, experience) are really graphemes is without any force. It rests on a simple confusion of iterability with permanence.

I have left the most important issue in this section until last. Do the special features of writing determine that there is some break with the author's intentions in particular or with intentionality in general in the forms of communication that occur in writing? Does the fact that writing can continue to function in the absence of the writer, the intended receiver, or the context of production show that writing is not a vehicle of intentionality? It seems to me quite plain that the argument that the author and intended receiver may be dead and the context unknown or forgotten does not in the least show that intentionality is absent from written communication; on the contrary, intentionality plays exactly the same role in written as in spoken communication. What differs in the two cases is not the intentions of the speaker but the role of the context of the utterance in the success of the communication. To show this ask yourself what happens when you read the text of a dead author. Suppose you read the sentence, "On the twentieth of September 1793 I set out on a journey from London to Oxford." Now how do you understand this sentence? To the extent that the author said what he meant and you understand what he said you will know that the author intended to make a statement to the effect that on the twentieth of September 1793, he set out on a journey from London to Oxford, and the fact that the author is dead and all his intentions died with him is irrelevant to this feature of your understanding of his surviving written utterances. But

suppose you decide to make a radical break—as one always can—with the strategy of understanding the sentence as an utterance of a man who once lived and had intentions like yourself and just think of it as a sentence of English, weaned from all production or origin, putative or otherwise. Even then there is no getting away from intentionality, because a *meaningful sentence is just a standing possibility of the corresponding (intentional) speech act.* To understand it, it is necessary to know that anyone who said it and meant it would be performing that speech act determined by the rules of the languages that give the sentence its meaning in the first place.

There are two obstacles to understanding this rather obvious point, one implicit in Derrida, the other explicit. The first is the illusion that somehow illocutionary intentions if they really existed or mattered would have to be something that *lay behind* the utterances, some inner pictures animating the visible signs. But of course in serious literal speech the sentences are precisely the realizations of the intentions: there need be no *gulf* at all between the illocutionary intention and its expression. The sentences are, so to speak, fungible intentions. Often, especially in writing, one forms one's intentions (or meanings) in the process of forming the sentences: there need not be two separate processes. This illusion is related to the second, which is that intentions must all be conscious. But in fact rather few of one's intentions are ever brought to consciousness as intentions. Speaking and writing are indeed conscious intentional activities, but the intentional aspect of illocutionary acts does not imply that there is a separate set of conscious states apart from simply writing and speaking.

To the extent that the author says what he means the text is the expression of his intentions. It is always possible that he may not have said what he meant or that the text may have become corrupt in some way; but exactly parallel considerations apply to spoken discourse. The situation as regards intentionality is exactly the same for the written word as it is for the spoken: understanding the utterance consists in recognizing the illocutionary intentions of the author and these intentions may be more or less perfectly realized by the words uttered, whether written or spoken. And understanding the sentence apart from any utterance is knowing what linguistic act its utterance would be the performance of.

When we come to the question of context, as Derrida is aware, the situation really is quite different for writing than it is for speech. In speech one can invoke all sorts of features of the context which are not possible to use in writing intended for absent receivers, without explicitly representing these features in the text. That is why verbatim

transcripts of conversations are so hard to interpret. In conversation a great deal can be communicated without being made explicit in the sentence uttered.

Derrida has a distressing penchant for saying things that are obviously false. I will discuss several instances in the next section but one deserves special mention at this point. He says the meaningless example of ungrammatical French, "le vert est ou," means (*signifie*) one thing anyhow, it means an example of ungrammaticality. But this is a simple confusion. The sequence "le vert est ou" does not MEAN an example of ungrammaticality, it does not mean anything, rather it IS an example of ungrammaticality. The relation of meaning is not to be confused with instantiation. This mistake is important because it is part of his generally mistaken account of the nature of quotation, and his failure to understand the distinction between use and mention. The sequence "le vert est ou" can indeed be *mentioned* as an example of ungrammaticality, but to mention it is not the same as to *use* it. In this example it is not used to mean anything; indeed it is not used at all.

II. DERRIDA'S AUSTIN

Derrida's discussion of Austin is designed to show that all the difficulties encountered by Austin in his theory of speech acts have a common root: "Austin has not taken account of what—in the structure of *locution* (thus before any illocutory or perlocutory determination)—entails that system of predicates I call *graphematic in general* . . ." (p. 187). Thus in what follows Derrida ties his discussion of Austin to his preceding discussion of writing; in both he emphasizes the role of the iterability and citationality of linguistic elements. I believe he has misunderstood Austin in several crucial ways and the internal weaknesses in his argument are closely tied to these misunderstandings. In this section therefore I will very briefly summarize his critique and then simply list the major misunderstandings and mistakes. I will conclude with an—again all too brief—discussion of the relation between intention and iterability in speech acts.

Derrida notes that Austin distinguishes between felicitous and infelicitous speech acts but does not sufficiently ponder the consequences arising from the fact that the possibility of failure of the speech act is a necessary possibility. More to the point, according to Derrida, Austin excludes the possibility that performative utterances (and *a priori* every other utterance) can be quoted. Derrida makes this extraordinary charge on the grounds that Austin has excluded fictional discourse, utterances made by actors on a stage, and other forms of what Austin

called "parasitic" or "etiolated" speech from consideration when setting out the preliminary statement of his theory of speech acts. Furthermore, according to Derrida, Austin saw these forms of discourse as a kind of *agonie* of language "qu'il faut fortement tenir à distance." They are not, according to Derrida's version of Austin, even part of "ordinary language." But, asks Derrida, does the possibility of this parasitism surround language like a ditch (*fossé*), an external place of perdition, as Austin seems to think; or it is not rather the case that this risk is the internal and positive condition of language itself? He points out ominously that "it is as just such a 'parasite' that writing has always been treated by the philosophical tradition" (p. 190). And he concludes his sequence of rhetorical questions with the following: "For, ultimately isn't it true that what Austin excludes as anomaly, exception, 'non-serious,' *citation* (on stage, in a poem, or a soliloquy) is the determined modification of a general citationality—or rather, a general iterability—without which there would not even be a 'successful' performative" (p. 191). According to Derrida (and contrary to what he supposes is Austin's view) a performative can succeed only if its formulation repeats a coded or iterable utterance, only if it is identifiable in some way as a citation. Once we have a typology of such forms of iteration we can see that there is "an essential absence of intention to the actuality of the utterance," and that Austin was wrong to exclude "parasitic" forms from ordinary language.

Before beginning a discussion of Derrida's charge I should point out that I hold no brief for the details of Austin's theory of speech acts, I have criticized it elsewhere and will not repeat those criticisms here.[3] The problem is rather that Derrida's Austin is unrecognizable. He bears almost no relation to the original.

1. Derrida has completely mistaken the status of Austin's exclusion of parasitic forms of discourse from his preliminary investigations of speech acts. Austin's idea is simply this: if we want to know what it is to make a promise or make a statement we had better not *start* our investigation with promises made by actors on stage in the course of a play or statements made in a novel by novelists about characters in the novel, because in a fairly obvious way such utterances are not standard cases of promises and statements. We do not, for example, hold the actor responsible today for the promise he made on stage last night in the way that we normally hold people responsible for their promises, and we do not demand of the author how he knows that his characters have such and such traits in a way that we normally expect the maker of a statement to be able to justify his claims. Austin describes this feature by saying that such utterances are "hollow" or "void" and "nonserious."

Furthermore, in a perfectly straightforward sense such utterances are "parasitical" on the standard cases: there could not, for example, be promises made by actors in a play if there were not the possibility of promises made in real life. The existence of the pretended form of the speech act is logically dependent on the possibility of the nonpretended speech act in the same way that any pretended form of behavior is dependent on nonpretended forms of behavior, and in that sense the pretended forms are *parasitical* on the nonpretended forms.

Austin's exclusion of these parasitic forms from consideration in his preliminary discussion is a matter of research strategy; he is, in his words, excluding them "at present"; but it is not a metaphysical exclusion: he is not casting them into a ditch or perdition, to use Derrida's words. Derrida seems to think that Austin's exclusion is a matter of great moment, a source of deep metaphysical difficulties, and that the analysis of parasitic discourse might create some insuperable difficulties for the theory of speech acts. But the history of the subject has proved otherwise. Once one has a general theory of speech acts—a theory which Austin did not live long enough to develop himself—it is one of the relatively simpler problems to analyze the status of parasitic discourse, that is, to meet the challenge contained in Derrida's question, "What is the status of this parasitism?" Writings subsequent to Austin's have answered this question.[4] But the terms in which this question can be intelligibly posed and answered already presuppose a general theory of speech acts. Austin correctly saw that it was necessary to hold in abeyance one set of questions, about parasitic discourse, until one has answered a logically prior set of questions about "serious" discourse. But the temporary exclusion of these questions within the development of the theory of speech acts, proved to be just that—temporary.

2. Related to the first misunderstanding about the status of the exclusion of parasitic discourse is a misunderstanding of the attitude Austin had to such discourse. Derrida supposes that the term "parasitic" involves some kind of moral judgment; that Austin is claiming that there is something bad or anomalous or not "ethical" about such discourse. Again, nothing could be further from the truth. The sense in which, for example, fiction is parasitic on nonfiction is the sense in which the definition of the rational numbers in number theory might be said to be parasitic on the definition of the natural numbers, or the notion of one logical constant in a logical system might be said to be parasitic on another, because the former is defined in terms of the latter. Such parasitism is a relation of logical dependence; it does not imply any moral judgment and certainly not that the parasite is somehow immorally sponging off the host (Does one really have to point this out?).

Furthermore it is simply a mistake to say that Austin thought parasitic discourse was not part of ordinary language. The expression "ordinary language" in the era that Austin gave these lectures was opposed to technical or symbolic or formalized language such as occurred in mathematical logic or in the technical terminology of philosophy. Austin never denied that plays and novels were written in ordinary language; rather his point is that such utterances are not produced in ordinary *circumstances*, but rather, for example, on stage or in a fictional text.

3. In what is more than simply a misreading of Austin, Derrida supposes that by analyzing serious speech acts before considering the parasitic cases, Austin has somehow denied the very possibility that expressions can be quoted. I find so many confusions in this argument of Derrida that I hardly know where to get started on it. To begin with, the phenomenon of citationality is not the same as the phenomenon of parasitic discourse. A man who composes a novel or a poem is not in general *quoting* anyone; and a man who says his lines on a stage while acting in a play while he is indeed repeating lines composed by someone else, is not in general quoting the lines. There is a basic difference in that in parasitic discourse the expressions are being *used* and not *mentioned.* To Derrida's rhetorical question, "For, ultimately, isn't it true that what Austin excludes as anomaly, exceptions, 'non-serious' *citation* (on stage, in a poem, or a soliloquy) is the determined modification of a general citationality—or rather, a general iterability—without which there would not even be a 'successful' performative?" (p. 191), the answer is a polite but firm "No, it isn't true." To begin with most of the instances of parasitic discourse are not cases of citation at all. They are, to repeat, cases where expressions are *used* and not mentioned. But, more important, parasitic discourse of the kind we have been considering is a determined modification of the rules for performing speech acts, but it is not in any way a modification of iterability or citationality. Like all utterances, parasitic forms of utterances are instances of, though not modifications of, iterability, for—to repeat—without iterability there is no language at all. Every utterance in a natural language, parasitic or not, is an instance of iterability, which is simply another way of saying that the type-token distinction applies to the elements of language.

Derrida in this argument confuses no less than three separate and distinct phenomena: iterability, citationality, and parasitism. Parasitism is neither an instance of nor a modification of citationality, it is an instance of iterability in the sense that any discourse whatever is an instance of iterability, and it is a modification of the rules of serious discourse. Stated in its most naked form, and leaving out the confusion about citationality, the structure of Derrida's argument is this: Parasit-

ism is (an instance of) iterability; iterability is presupposed by all performative utterances; Austin excludes parasitism, therefore he excludes iterability; therefore he excludes the possibility of all performative utterances and *a priori* of all utterances.

But this argument is not valid. Even had Austin's exclusion of fictional discourse been a metaphysical exclusion and not a part of his investigative strategy, it would not follow from the fact that Austin excludes parasitic discourse that he excludes any other forms of iterability. Quite the contrary. He sets aside the problems of fiction in order to get at the properties of nonfictional performatives. Both are instances of iterability in the trivial sense that any use of language whatever is an instance of a use of iterable elements, but the exclusion of the former does not preclude the possibility of the latter.

On a sympathetic reading of Derrida's text we can construe him as pointing out, quite correctly, that the possibility of parasitic discourse is internal to the notion of language, and that performatives can succeed only if the utterances are iterable, repetitions of conventional—or as he calls them, "coded"—forms. But neither of these points is in any way an objection to Austin. Indeed, Austin's insistence on the conventional character of the performative utterance in particular and the illocutionary act in general commits him precisely to the view that performatives must be iterable, in the sense that any conventional act involves the notion of the repetition of the same.

4. Derrida assimilates the sense in which writing can be said to be parasitic on spoken language with the sense in which fiction, etc., are parasitic on nonfiction or standard discourse. But these are quite different. In the case of the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, the relation is one of logical dependency. One could not have the concept of fiction without the concept of serious discourse. But the dependency of writing on spoken language is a contingent fact about the history of human languages and not a logical truth about the nature of language. Indeed, in mathematical and logical symbolism the relation of dependence goes the other way. The spoken, oral version of the symbols is simply an orally communicable way of representing the primary written forms.

5. A leitmotif of Derrida's entire discussion is the idea that somehow the iterability of linguistic forms (together with the citationality of linguistic forms and the existence of writing) militates against the idea that intention is the heart of meaning and communication, that indeed, an understanding of iteration will show the "essential absence of intention to the actuality of the utterance." But even if everything he said about iterability were true it would not show this. Indeed, I shall con-

clude this discussion by arguing for precisely the converse thesis: The iterability of linguistic forms facilitates and is a necessary condition of the particular forms of intentionality that are characteristic of speech acts.

The performances of actual speech acts (whether written or spoken) are indeed events, datable singular events in particular historical contexts. But as events they have some very peculiar properties. They are capable of communicating from speakers to hearers an infinite number of different contents. There is no upper limit on the number of new things that can be communicated by speech acts, which is just another way of saying that there is no limit on the number of new speech acts. Furthermore, hearers are able to understand this infinite number of possible communications simply by recognizing the intentions of the speakers in the performances of the speech acts. Now given that both speaker and hearer are finite, what is it that gives their speech acts this limitless capacity for communication? The answer is that the speaker and hearers are masters of the sets of rules we call the rules of language, and these rules are recursive. They allow for the repeated application of the same rule.

Thus the peculiar features of the intentionality that we find in speech acts require an iterability that includes not only the type we have been discussing, the repetition of the same word in different contexts, but also includes an iterability of the application of syntactical rules. Iterability—both as exemplified by the repeated use of the same word type and as exemplified by the recursive character of syntactical rules—is not as Derrida seems to think something in conflict with the intentionality of linguistic acts, spoken or written, it is the necessary presupposition of the forms which that intentionality takes.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to H. Dreyfus and D. Searle for discussion of these matters.

2. This of course is not the normal purpose of quotation, but it is a possible purpose.

3. See J. R. Searle, "Austin on Locutionary and Illocutionary Acts," *Philosophical Review* (1968), and "A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts," *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 6 (1975).

4. For a detailed answer to the question, see J. R. Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse," *New Literary History* 5 (1975).