

**SPEECH ACTS AND LITERATURE: REMARKS ON AN
OFTEN-OVERLOOKED ASPECT OF THE SEARLE--DERRIDA DEBATE**

KANAVILLIL RAJAGOPALAN
IEL/UNICAMP

Can the theory of speech acts tell us anything **new** about literature - anything, that is, that we have not always already "known" in some sense? To many of us, the very question might seem downright preposterous, or, at the very least, naive. After all, one might ask, isn't the plethora of already published work on the topic itself proof enough that the theory of speech acts has, by all means, contributed to a better understanding of the phenomenon we call literature? Now, an argument such as this characteristically rests on an appeal to the history, recent or remote, of an institutionally acclaimed practice, from which alone we are called upon to infer the legitimacy of a certain intellectual stance. The underlying premise is that, had it not been for the soundness of the principle, practice would not have survived through the years the way it did.¹

There is a certain *momento* in his celebrated debate with Jacques Derrida,² when John Searle invokes the institutional argument referred to above, apparently satisfied that he has hit upon a veritable clincher. He brings in the argument as part of his strategy to blunt the biting edge of Derrida's thesis that Austin's endeavour to capture the "essence" of what he calls performative utterances flounders concomitantly with the rather painful realization on his part that the so-called "parasitic" discourse (literature, for instance) is just what makes serious discourse possible to begin with - that the former is, and will always be, a **necessary possibility** of the latter: Says Searle, "Derrida seems to think that Austin's exclusion is a matter of great *momento*, 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

¹ The research reported in this paper is part of a project financed by the CNPq (Grant n° 306151/88-0).

² See J. Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', *Glyph* Vol. 1. (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977) Pp.172-197; John R. Searle, 'Reiteratin the differences' *Glyph* Vol. 1. Pp.198-208; and Derrida's response to Searle, 'Limited Inc. abc', *Glyph* Vol. 2. (1977). Pp.162-254.

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?"³

The overall tone of Searle's remarks is unmistakable: it makes no sense whatever to talk of parasitic discourse unless one already has an independently formulated notion of non-parasitic - call it 'serious' if you will - discourse. Which is, in one sense, a truism; in point of fact, trivially so. For the mere existence of a parasite **presupposes** - in the strong, logically rigorous sense of the word - the existence of a host. What Searle is alluding to is then the all too obvious fact that it is the host that gives sustenance to the parasite. To quote him again, "... the terms in which the question "What is the status of this parasitism?" 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".⁴

But the supposed logical priority of the set of questions that Searle believes Austin to have unquestioningly assumed is precisely what Derrida is at pains to call into question. In what turns out to be the typical inaugural move of all deconstructive endeavour (it is only an opening gambit, for as Derrida himself has tirelessly emphasized on several occasions, it must be followed up by a drive towards an endless dispersion or decentering), Derrida is insisting that were it not for the perception that something is a parasite to begin with, one would hardly feel the need to look for a host, so it is the parasite that sets off the inferential chain and not the host. Paradoxically then, it is the host that owes its existence to the parasite and not the other way round.

Of course, Searle is not going to give in so easily, either. For, as he has done it elsewhere⁵, he will enter the caveat that the classic, Nietzschean, deconstruction of causality on which Derrida is evidently modelling his own adroitly impish tactic, itself rests on the inability to tell the epistemic from the ontic. Once such a distinction is admitted, the deconstructors' pet theme of the debunking of the cause-and-effect sequence may be seen as valid at best from an epistemic point of view, telling us nothing whatsoever as to how the things stand in the real world.

Can Searle, at this stage, afford to sit back, content with the idea that he has finally taken the wind out of the deconstructors' sails? The answer is: unfortunately, not. The reason is that the argument against the thesis of causality has as its prime target its time-honoured role as the prototype of **all** dichotomies, **tout court**. The deconstructor can therefore maintain that by positing or appealing to further dichotomies such as epistemic/ontic, all that one can hope to achieve is ward off for the time being the inexorable "logic" of deconstruction, not escape it definitively.

³ 'Reiterating the differences'. p.205. The emphasis is mine.

⁴ Id. *ibid*.

⁵ See John R. Searle, 'Review of J. Culler, *On Deconstruction*' *New York Review of Books*, Oct. 27, 1983. Pp.74-79.

Be that as it may, it may be worth the while to go back to Searle's summary dismissal of Derrida's deconstructive reading of Austin and ask what exactly is at stake, after all, in this *cause célèbre*? Searle's whole point is clearly that Derrida has irredeamably misread Austin. In his own words, "The problem is rather that Derrida's Austin is unrecognizable. He bears no relation to the original"⁶. In the light of the argument contained in the passage cited earlier, we may then interpret him as saying that Derrida's Austin turns out to be nothing more than a caricature, exaggeratedly (unrecognizably) grotesque for the reason that Austin's temporary exclusion of parasitical discourse is mistakenly taken to be a key feature of his philosophical profile. In Searle's view, Derrida made a big mistake, for what he saw as a matter of great moment was in fact a minor, inconsequential, decision on Austin's part; if anything, purely methodologically motivated. Furthermore, that Derrida was utterly wrong about the whole thing is retrospectively confirmed - again, according to Searle - by the subsequent history of the subject.

Now, there are some crucial features of Searle's argument against Derrida that may not be immediately obvious but deserve closer attention. The Austin that Searle swears by is - and he does not even admit the possibility of its being otherwise - the real, original, Austin (the one who enchanted a whole generation of philosophy students at Oxford, Searle himself included; the one who cast a magic spell on the audience that attended his talks at Harvard; and all the rest of it) - as opposed to Derrida's "unrecognizable" caricature. Though he himself does not put it this way, it is easy to imagine him as conceding that the latter is "parasitic" upon the former. And, he would further insist that the former is logically prior to the latter in the sense that if there were no such thing as an "original Austin" there could be no caricature of him - and Derrida couldn't have done - in Searle's opinion, badly - what he is credited with having done at all. Searle's whole argument, then, boils down to the claim that there is some level of analysis where that "original Austin" is available for public inspection and that he, John Searle, knows where and how to look for it (The use of the indefinite pronoun would seem to be amply justified, especially if one were to recall the words "It would be spoke to" as said by Bernardo to Marcellus and Horatio in the opening scene of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*). In other words, it is important to realize at this stage that in a non-trivial sense Searle's argument against Derrida rests on the veracity of the very same proposition it seeks to prove. The net result is that Searle's whole argument threatens to reveal the following circular format: Derrida's thesis that Austin failed to take account of the fact that it is the parasitic discourse that defines its serious/authentic counterpart and not the other way round simply cannot be true because Derrida's Austin is itself parasitic upon the original/authentic Austin and, furthermore, we know that it is the original/real Austin that we must attend to and not a caricature/parasitic version

⁶ 'Reiterating the differences', p.204.

thereof - and, finally, this in turn is so because it is the real Austin that defines his caricature and not the other way round as Derrida has been mistakenly led to believe.

Now, the only way out of this vicious circle is to ask the question: Under what circumstances is one entitled to say one's Austin is indeed the real, original Austin? Is it at all possible to stumble upon the real Austin, and, even more importantly, realize or perceive that what one has the sensation of having just stumbled upon is the much-sought-after real, original Austin and not any of his presumably innumerable look-alikes? In order to answer the question, we must first be able to specify what we mean by the "real Austin". Do we mean the real Austin, the one in flesh and blood, the one Searle can claim he met at Oxford and the one that Derrida, for all we know, never had the pleasure of shaking hands with and saying, "Enchenté!" In his debate with his fellow philosopher Keith Donnellan⁷, Searle himself has fairly convincingly argued to the effect that each of these several ways of referring to the so-called "real" Austin constitutes an "aspect" of the referent and that, in the final analysis, "all reference is under an aspect"⁸. But then, if all that one has access to is one aspect or another of the intended referent, how can one at all know that one has come across the right aspect, the one that correctly describes the referent, albeit partially, given that the stock of aspects in its totality is potentially infinite and that there is no built-in guarantee that some of the descriptions elected as possible aspects may not turn out to be figments of imagination? Faced with this grim prospect, Searle's only reaction is the expression of hope that "eventually we will reach the bedrock"⁹. Going back to the question of identifying the real Austin, it now becomes evident that something more than mere corporeal presence of the English philosopher is required. What is it? The only meaningful sense in which one can still insist on making a definite reference to the real, original Austin is under the circumstance that one has identified an Austin who is, in addition to all the afore-mentioned attributes, in full control of himself and his consciousness - an Austin, in other words, at his Cartesian best, waiting for us on the "bedrock" of the underworld of reference. Such anyhow is Searle's Austin, the one in comparison with whom he can dismiss Derrida's Austin as "unrecognizable".¹⁰ Searle's Austin is, in other words, a prime example of what Derrida calls the metaphysics of presence at work.

Now, it is important to realize at this stage that there are no **rational** grounds for rejecting the metaphysics of presence. This point has been very ably brought

⁷ See K.S. Donnellan 'Reference and definite descriptions' *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 75 (1966) Pp.281-304; J.R. Searle, 'Referential and attributive' in his *Expression and Meaning*, Cambridge, CUP, (1979) Pp.137-161.

⁸ Id. *ibid.*, p.142.

⁹ Id. *ibid.*, p.145.

¹⁰ 'Reiterating the differences' p.204.

forward by Richard Rorty¹¹ who argues that if there is any inconsistency at all in Derrida's acrimonious rebuttal, it has to do with his desire to beat Searle at the latter's favourite game. To quote him, "That is why Derrida looks bad whenever he attempts argument on his opponents' turf; those are the passages in which he becomes a patsy for John Searle"¹².

If the Cartesian concept of the "ghost in the machine" (to use Ryle's memorable phrase) is the key to an understanding of Searle's claims as to a privileged access to a putative "original" Austin, it is also, as it turns out, the one major issue that Austin himself may be seen as constantly wrestling with. In **Sense and Sensibilia**¹³ for instance, the Platonic-Cartesian "pursuit of the incorrigible" is described as "one of the most venerable bugbears in the history of philosophy" and submitted to merciless debunking.

Recent research by Felman¹⁴ and Forrester¹⁵ among others has brought to light areas of convergence between Austin's philosophy and psychoanalysis. There seems to be an important lesson to be learnt from these pioneering works as well as Barbara Johnson's incredible perspicacious reading¹⁶ of Austin's **How to Do Things with Words**, wherein she notes that in coining the terms of his new vocabulary that included "performative", "speech act", "masquerade" etc., Austin was having recourse to the very same theatrical discourse that he was otherwise anxious to discard as unworthy of the philosophers' attention for being part of the parasitical language. And that lesson is that, if anything, it is but **in spite of** himself that Austin says the most important things he is at all "able" to say.

Perhaps at this stage we are in a better position to answer the question with which we began all this discussion: Can the theory of speech acts tell us anything about literature - anything, that is, that we have not always already "known" in some sense? The answer, in the way in which it is to be qualified below, can only be a categorical "No". With the argument based on the institutional prestige of the **theory** out of the way, it is no longer difficult to see that most of the work done in this area so far is a direct consequence of the one grounding principle that the theory of speech acts has assumed axiomatically since its very inception - viz., that literature is parasitic

¹¹ See Richard Rorty, 'Pragmatism and literary theory: philosophy without principles' *Critical Inquiry* 11. n° 3. Pp.459-465.

¹² Id. *ibid.*, p.462.

¹³ Oxford, Clarendon Press (1961).

¹⁴ See S. Felman *Le Scandale de Corps parlant: Don Juan avec Austin ou la Séduction en deux langues*. Paris, Seuil (1980).

¹⁵ See John Forrester, *The Seductions of Psychoanalysis, Freud, Lacan and Derrida*, Cambridge. CUP (1990).

¹⁶ See B. Johnson, 'Poetry and performative language: Mallarmé and Austin' in her *The Critical Difference*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, Pp.52-66.

discourse. To the extent that it is such a theory that is asked to do the job of "explaining literature" (the theory itself never being subjected to a re-evaluation in the light of what literature might, independently of this or that theory, might strike one as being), it is bound to "turn up" results that were always, already, predicatable from the very outset.

But it so happens that the **theory** of speech acts as we know it, is Searle's, not Austin's - a point seldom remembered in the literature on the subject. Searle admits it himself, as when he parenthetically qualifies the theory as something "which Austin did not live long enough to develop himself"¹⁷, though nevertheless nurturing the belief that such a theory is somehow in the "offing" in Austin's reflections.

Alternative readings of Austin's philosophy seem to point in a different direction. On a non-Searlesque approach, Austin's philosophical endeavour reveals itself to be inescapably caught up in the vortex of its own tantalizing dynamics. And contrary to all appearance and to the long tradition of analytic philosophy where one can nevertheless locate its roots, the Austinian text turns out to be a narrative in the sense of Rorty¹⁸, the saga of his own brave endeavour, albeit in vain, to arrest the eddying stream of his own thoughts and stop to theorize about them. And sure enough, Derrida seems to have been among the first to discern this tragic but healthily Nietzschean flavour of the Austinian enterprise.

Austin's non-theory, as opposed to Searle's theory of speech acts, then, has a lot to tell us about literature (and this is the important qualifier we must append to the answer to the question we posed at the beginning of this text). And what it tells us includes the surprising truism that it is literature that underwrites life and not the other way round as one is often tempted to believe. In the words of Stanley Fish, "What philosophical semantics and the philosophy of speech acts are telling us is that ordinary language is extraordinary because at its heart is precisely that realm of values and intentions and purposes which is often assumed to be the exclusive property of literature."¹⁹

¹⁷ 'Reiterating the differences'. p.205.

¹⁸ See R. Rorty, **Consequences of Pragmatism**, Minneapolis (1982).

¹⁹ See S. Fish, 'How ordinary is ordinary language?' p.108, in his **Is There a Text in this Class?** Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, Pp.97-117 (1980).