



“THE FORCE OF THE EVENT”: PERFORMATIVE FAILURES AND QUEER REPETITIONS IN AUSTIN, BUTLER, AND DERRIDA

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ABSTRACT

Much has been written on Derrida’s and Butler’s discussions of Austin’s speech act theory, but one thing at least remains unclear: why does performativity hinge on the notion of “force,” and what “force” are we here talking about? For Austin, the force of the performative signals a performative enforcement, a validating repetition of prior conditions of legitimation: it testifies to the “felicity” or “success” of the performative event. According to Derrida, this articulation between force and success closes off the eventness of the event; it implies an ontological reduction and reconstruction, that is, an appropriation of the event in the form of performative power. However, the performative, if it is to truly produce an event, must exceed prior conditions of validation and transform, in its performance, the conditions of validity it was meant to repeat. Eventness must remain beyond and without power. In this perspective, the article explores the “force” which Derrida describes as “force of the event”: an excessive force in the face of which “performative force” must fail. At bottom undecidable, “the force of the event” suggests the fallibility of force and the force of fallibility. I compare this self-deconstructive notion of force with Butler’s subversive politics of the performative, which theorizes “performative force” as the force of a *failure* – but a *successful* failure – to comply with the norm: a non-normative repetition and a reappropriation that forces change, and of which “queer” is at once the example, the model, and the very name. While Derrida’s is an attempt to think the uncanny force of a strange, non-appropriable, non-ontologizable, and perhaps “queer” event or quasi-event, characterized by fallibility and undecidability, Butler’s theory of power and her notion of “performative force” reverse, but fundamentally maintain, Austin’s ontological oppositions between success and failure, legitimacy and illegitimacy, repetition and change.

Keywords: Performativity; Performance; Speech act theory; Deconstruction; Gender studies; Queer theory; Ontology; Foucault’s theory of power.

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À force de — faillite à force de faillite la folie s’en mêle. À force de débris.

(Beckett 1981)

Besides the uttering of the words of the so-called performative, a good many other things have as a general rule to be right and to go right if we are to be 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: the utterance is then, we may say, not indeed false but in general *unhappy*. And for this reason we call the doctrine of *the things that can be and go wrong* on the occasion of such utterances, the doctrine of the *Infelicities*.

(Austin 1962, 14)

All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.

(Beckett 1983, 7)

PROLOGUE: DÉBRIS — BY FORCE OF FAILING (MAL VU MAL DIT)

“Try again. Fail again. Fail better”: Samuel Beckett’s quote from *Worstward Ho* (1983) has become ubiquitous, awkwardly colonizing the most unlikely of contexts. Truncated, dismembered, extracted from its “original” body, it has come to be reinterpreted as an inspirational mantra, summoned in self-help books and printed on colorful posters in order to put an optimistic twist on human failures all around the world (Beauman 2012). This globalized and merchandized (re)appropriation through pop culture was unpredictable, to say the least: one could hardly imagine more complete betrayal than the transformation of Beckett’s gloomy imperative to go *worstward* into a “feel-good” encouragement to persevere despite failure. Whether we consider this (mis)interpretation of the “fail bet-

ter" injunction as shocking or intriguing, saddening or amusing, it somehow testifies to a structural possibility of performative (or "perverformative," perhaps²) pervertibility and distortion inseparable from interpretability: words and language taken out of their initial context of utterance, already meaning and/or performing something else; failing to succeed, perhaps, but already becoming other or otherworldly; failing *better*, maybe, differently at least, through a monstrously generative process performing beyond good or evil, right or wrong, once severed from their supposed originary context. Are we still talking, here, about the same "failure"? How to consider the force of this other fallibility, located before or beyond failure and success, and transforming in its monstrous event the very conditions of a phrase's legibility and legitimacy?

On an explicit level, Beckett's *Worstward Ho* constitutes a literary experimentation wherein some narrative instance enjoins itself to produce the worst possible work of fiction. In this sense, this effort already presupposes the existence of criteria of literary quality or legitimacy — and, seemingly, an inversion thereof. The notion of "failing better" thus seems to constitute an exhortation to fail completely and absolutely. But soon the difficulty to achieve this goal becomes manifest: "The words too whosoever. What room for worse! How almost true they sometimes almost ring! How wanting in inanity!" And the "narrator" (for lack of better word) laments: "Far from wrong. Far far from wrong" (Beckett 1983, 21).

Perhaps that, on an implicit level, absolute failure never was an option: no one would expect a Nobel Prize winner to deliver an unmitigatedly terrible piece of work. And beyond the sole measure of its author's prestige, beyond literary prizes and institutional legitimacies, *Worstward Ho* constitutes a masterpiece of dark comedy and performative writing. In its "performance," and through a vertiginous *mise en abyme*, Beckett's work already interrogates the referential power of language, emphasizing its incapacity to instantiate or "produce" the very thing that it enunciates: "Say a body. Where none" (7). But what is then left as work, as *oeuvre*? And what does this significant remainder say about "failure" itself?

Had Beckett managed to fail completely, his attempt would perhaps constitute, somewhat legitimately, a roaring success. But in and through its failure to fail, *Worstward Ho* "is" already something else, beyond failure and beyond success. What is "it"? A performative contradiction? A lamentable triumph? Something else, perhaps? In this paradoxical knot, something happens which cannot equate pure failure, some sort of event already complicating, exceeding, and displacing the failure/success binary opposition: perhaps something like a deconstruction. Here is the paradoxical law, the unjustifiable force of the work's sin-

² On the "perverformative," see Derrida 2008.

gularity: Beckett's most nihilistic impulses, even in his most explicitly pessimistic works, are outmanoeuvred and overtaken by the very event of their performance and writing, their humour and irony, as well as their lasting impact on the reader and the literary scene — and far beyond, as we have seen, through the most unpredictable or untimely of manifestations, beyond, maybe, the visibility of any horizons. Jacques Derrida interpreted this paradox at the heart of Beckett's oeuvre as a deconstructive (or self-deconstructive) potency: "A certain nihilism is both interior to metaphysics (the final fulfilment of metaphysics, Heidegger would say) and then, already, beyond. With Beckett in particular, the two possibilities are in the greatest possible proximity and competition. He is nihilist and he is not nihilist" (Derrida 1992, 61).

How could one "fail better"?³ A failure worthy of the name, a "successful" failure, so to speak, may only be validated as such because it fails to meet criteria for success. What could then be the rationale behind the "better" good that may be associated with failure according to Beckett's oxymoronic phrase? According to what criteria of legitimation may such "betterness" be attested? I'll have more to say about this in the following "Acts," but let's just say for now that beyond the mere failure to meet present standards, beyond existing conditions of validation and legitimation, "failing better" seems to indicate the possibility of another law or legitimacy, one in and through which failure and success would still remain undistinguishable and co-implicated, wherein conventional criteria of legitimacy and illegitimacy would remain attached to the undecidability of an event. The notion of fallibility which I am articulating here does not simply designate the failure to conform to existing conditions of success and legitimating conventions; it points to a so-called "betterness" that would remain attached to a somewhat generative undecidability, one that could, perhaps, impulse the transformation of conditions of legitimation determining success or failure — so that what *may* or *should* have appeared as failure according to prior conventions will have already altered, in and through the force of an event, the interpretative models through which it might be assessed as successful or unsuccessful.

Failing *better*: in this sense, the comparative "better" gestures towards the performative or metaperformative invention of new modes of legitimation, ones which do not pre-exist the so-called performative utterance which forcefully imposed them but cannot either be entirely deducible from it, since these remain to be *made*, constated, and, perhaps, admitted. It would be a comparative without comparison, if such thing is possible; its "force" would remain incomparable and unjustifiable in the horizon of present criteria. And this would be the condition

³ I ask this question from a different angle, in relation to queer readings of Beckett and the notion of "queer failure," in Mercier 2022a.

to think the eventness of an event worthy of the name, beyond traditional performatives, one which already transforms the conditions of its own readability (Derrida 2002a, 271). But this would also suggest a structural *illegibility* of the event “as such,” since the legitimating conventions determining its interpretability (and notably its interpretation as successful or not) themselves hinge on *another* performative event, itself or an other, itself *as* an other, and on the possibility that, perhaps, the event come to find a reader. Here, the event of this coming must remain inappropriable in the present, any present. In this out-of-joint space and time without presence, the event is neither failure nor success; or perhaps does it come, and remain, failing and succeeding at once or in turn, neither quite legitimate nor illegitimate, as an “a-legitimate” force of fallibility preceding or exceeding failure and success as such.⁴ What kind of “force” “is” “this”? Under what conditions could “it” be called a “force” — or any *name*, for that matter?

1. ACT I: OF FRAMING AND CONTEXTS; OF THEIR “FORCE”

A few words *for context*: in what precedes I made heavy use of the proto-political lexicon of “legitimacy”⁵ — and I’ll start this first “Act” by forcefully declaring that this essay will be about politics, about, say, “the political” or “the social.” This is how I will frame this presentation — a “performative” framing, if you like, and all the more justified because I will *not* speak about politics in this essay.⁶

⁴ The word “a-legitimate” follows the model of Derrida’s “a-legal,” used to describe the force of a “founding violence” of law that is neither legal nor illegal: “any juridico-political founding of a ‘living together’ is, by essence, violent, since it inaugurates there where a law [*droit*] did not yet exist. The founding of a state or of a constitution, therefore, of a ‘living together’ according to a state of law [*un état du droit*], is always first of all a nonlegal [*a-légale*] violence: not illegal but nonlegal [*a-légale*], otherwise put, *unjustifiable* with regard to an existing law, since the law is inexistent there where it is a matter of creating it. No state has ever been founded without this violence, whatever form and whatever time it might have taken” (Derrida 2013, 29-30). I prefer the term “a-legal” rather than “nonlegal” — used by Gil Anidjar to translate “a-légale” — because the a-legal violence described by Derrida is not, I believe, *nonlaw*, outside of law, or even something else than “law”: it is structurally implicated in the legality of the law, like injustice itself, even though this binding co-implication of the just and unjust also implies a heterogeneity, a force of rupture *and* obligation — a “strange violence” of the law, articulated by Derrida to an “originary sociality” or “arche-originary pledge [*gage*]” (2005b, 231; 244, translation modified), or to the “originary performativity” and “force of rupture” of a “*violence* of the law before the law and before meaning,” also attached to *differance* (1994, 36–37). On these questions, see also Senatore 2013, 7-10; and Mercier 2016; 2020.

⁵ The present essay can be read as the 2nd part of a trilogy that started with “Resisting Legitimacy: Weber, Derrida, and the Fallibility of Sovereign Power” (Mercier 2016), wherein I offered a deconstructive analysis of some of the chief principles of sociology, political theory, and International Relations — notably through their reliance on Max Weber’s formalization of the notion of legitimation. The 3rd part of the trilogy is forthcoming (Mercier 2022a).

⁶ I say “justified,” that is to say, at bottom *unjustifiable*: as Derrida showed in *Limited Inc*, the “fixing” or determination of a context always entails a “clause of nonclosure,” and can never

Or let’s say that I will *barely* speak about politics. *J’en parlerai à peine*.

This seems to be one of Judith Butler’s theses in their⁷ book *Excitable Speech*: Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive reading of performativity is barely political. Why “barely”?

On the one hand, Butler is very clear that Derrida’s reading of Austin’s theory of speech acts and performativity provides the conditions for “political change.” It allows “the possibility of a resignification” “based on the prior possibility that a formula can break with its originary context” (Butler 1997, 147). On this account, Butler clearly distinguishes Derrida’s from Bourdieu’s theory of performativity. Contrary to what Butler describes as Bourdieu’s rigidly ritualized sociology of symbolic power and legitimacy, Derrida would allow us to envisage diverse forms of political resistance through the performative force of language: a force of “change,” a political resistance which Butler conceives of as a resistance “against” the norm: here, “against” suggests *both* a rupture *and* a continuity, a contaminating contact with the norm (we’ll see how and why in a moment).

However, *on the other hand*, Derrida’s account of deconstruction is also said by Butler to be “paralyzing.” And, according to them, it is “paralyzing” because it *cannot locate* “force” — Butler is very explicit about this concern. (This essay will be entirely focused on analysing this concern of Butler’s.) In Butler’s reading, Derrida’s account of “force” (the force of the performative) somehow eludes critical analysis — which, according to Butler, appears to be detrimental for “a politics of the performative.” More precisely, deconstruction is said to “paralyz[e] the social analysis of forceful utterance.” Let me quote Butler extensively:

If the break from context that a performative can or, in Derridean terms, *must* perform is something that every “mark” performs by virtue

be justified through-and-through. Such fixing or determination thus always involves a certain force or violence, albeit a highly paradoxical one. See Derrida (1988): “The phrase which for some has become a sort of slogan, in general so badly understood, of deconstruction (‘there is nothing outside the text’ [*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*]), means nothing else: there is nothing outside context” (136). “The structure thus described supposes both that there are only contexts, that nothing *exists* outside context, as I have often said, but also that the limit of the frame or the border of the context always entails a clause of nonclosure” (152). “This is why (a) the finiteness of a context is never secured or simple, there is an indefinite opening of every context, an essential nontotalization; (b) whatever there can be of force or of irreducible violence in the attempt ‘to fix the contexts of utterances,’ or of anything else, can always communicate, by virtue of the erasure just mentioned, with a certain ‘weakness,’ even with an essential nonviolence. It is in this relationship, which is difficult to think through, highly unstable and dangerous, that responsibilities jell, political responsibilities in particular” (137). Let’s try to do “justice” to contexts, then, starting with the context in which this article was “produced”: it is based on a talk given in September 2016 at the international conference “Performance & Philosophy,” in Ljubljana, Slovenia. The theme of the conference was “Repetition/s.”

⁷ As of 2020, Butler’s preferred pronouns are they/them/their.

of its graphematic structure, then all marks and utterances are equally afflicted by such failure, and it makes no sense to ask how it is that certain utterances break from prior contexts with more ease than others or why certain utterances come to carry the force to wound that they do, whereas others fail to exercise such force at all. Whereas Bourdieu fails to take account of the way in which a performative can break with existing context and assume new contexts, refiguring the terms of legitimate utterance themselves, Derrida appears to install the break as a structurally necessary feature of every utterance and every codifiable written mark, thus paralyzing the social analysis of forceful utterance. We have yet to arrive at an account of the social iterability of the utterance. (Butler 1997, 150)

The apoliticalness of deconstruction! We’ve all heard this before; we’ll certainly hear it again. Repetitions.

Why am I starting with this?

My background is in political theory and International Relations. A lot of my research in the past was dedicated to clarifying Foucault’s and Derrida’s respective conceptualisations of power and violence. This is how I came to study performativity, and the question of performative repetition interests me here because it is also a theory of “force,” and on the conditions of “political change,” to speak like Butler. Butler’s claim is that a certain performative force of transformation can offer a resistance against power by *repeating* power, only differently. This performative force could subvert the normativity of norms by challenging the purely reproductive capacity of the performing machine of power, and could therefore induce a transformation *from within* the machine — a machine which Butler critically names the “mechanical and predictable reproduction of power” (1997, 19). I say “critically,” because Butler is very suspicious of this denomination, about the reduction of performativity to a reliable, fully functional and effective, operational and self-reproductive machinery — what I would call, in French, *une machine performante*. Butler believes, rightly so in my opinion, that such framing of performativity as strictly mechanical diminishes capacities of resistance. Nonetheless, Butler argues that resisting the performativity of norms requires another form or expression of performativity. Thus, Butler attempts to *play* a certain performativity *against* another performativity. Performativity differing from itself.

What we should do, then, according to Butler, is to rethink the articulation between power and resistance — and despite its shortcomings, Derrida’s approach to theories of performativity, with his insistence on repetition, repeatability, citationality could help us do just that: it makes resistance “impure,” which may be, according to Butler, a good thing. Performative resistance or, as Butler

often names it in *Excitable Speech*, “insurrectionary speech,” involves a performative force of reappropriation, a “productive” or “subversive resignification,” “a repetition in language that *forces* change” — that’s the very last sentence of *Excitable Speech* (1997, 163; I emphasize “forces”).

As I said, this form of resistance is presented by Butler as a resistance *from within*; it suggests “a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint” (2004, 1). Here, as often, Butler’s theory of power/resistance seems to be influenced chiefly by Foucault’s. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler explained that performative resistance against power involves “the difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably *impure*” (1993, 241). Let me emphasize, for now, the adjective “impure”:

Performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a “pure” opposition, a “transcendence” of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably *impure*. (1993, 241)

There is no “pure subversion,” as Butler writes on the previous page of the same chapter, one called “Critically Queer” — which immediately begs the question: if all subversion or resistance is “impure,” how can we track “impure” subversion? How may we recognise resistance against power, or identify the “production” of “alternative modalities of power”? Does “it” (“insurrectionary speech,” “contestation,” “resistance,” “subversion,” “subversive resignification,” “change,” even “force”) ever *present* itself? And can it be made the object of a social or political theory of performatives?

These questions — which Butler tried to answer in *Excitable Speech* — have to do with a certain decision (perhaps a *performative* decision) on the nature and circumscribability of resistance, of resistance as opposed to power, while said “resistance” is at the same time described as structurally and essentially impure, and therefore somewhat *complicit* with power, enmeshed with it: in these conditions, how can we locate and designate resistance *as such*? How can we locate and designate such or such forms, performative practices or discourses of resistance within the field of power? How can we locate what Butler names “a future”?

Who/what may decide what a future “is”? — and that the future is *now*?

These are the questions I wish to address in this essay. I want to analyse the ways in which theories of performativity can help us consider the possibility of “political change”, and consider it in its uncanny articulation with repetition. As

if there were some strange complicity or intimacy, some obscure conspiracy between “change” and “repetition.”

In order to clarify these questions, I will track the notion of “force” in Austin’s, Butler’s, and Derrida’s accounts of performativity and speech act theory.⁸ I am going to start with an informed hypothesis: all theories of performativity, in all domains or disciplines, whatever their context of inscription or production, carry with them, explicitly or tacitly, a reference to “force.” Therefore, they also carry with them a certain conceptuality, a knowledge and a practice, a practical knowledge or a “power-knowledge” (*un pouvoir-savoir*, to speak like Foucault), that is, a certain performativity attached to theoretical discourses and practices of “force,” of “performative force,” and of performativity *tout court*.

Performativity — what is that? And how is it related to force?

2. ACT II: WHAT IS “FORCE”?

As a matter of fact, everything started with force: Austin made use of that term, in a very insistent, repetitive manner, when he “invented” the performative “itself” — so that every time one refers to “performativity,” every time one repeats that “word,” they cannot *not* bring with it the whole machinery, including the discourse on and of “force,” and maybe the force or forcefulness of this discourse on “force.” Now, we should keep in mind that wherever there is force, there might be violence — there is no force without at least the possibility of violence.⁹ So, what is the tacit force or violence of the conceptuality attached to “force,” and in particular with “performative force”? What is the performative force in re-enacting, that is to say “repeating,” identically or otherwise, in a different context, the force involved in theories of performativity — the force on which their argumentative strategy depends, and/or the force which they sustain through such strategy?

The tautological aspect of this question appears immediately; it shouldn’t come as a surprise, because, as I will try to show, the question of force is always

⁸ For theoretical discussions of Austin’s theory of performativity, see among others Benveniste (1971), Derrida (1988; 2002c; 2005a, 2005c), Lyotard (1984), Felman (2003), Gasché (1981; Gasché’s essay discusses Paul de Man’s take on Austin and speech act theory), Bourdieu (1991), Butler (1993; 1997), Sedgwick (1993). Discussions of Derrida’s deconstructive reading of Austin can be found in Butler (1993; 1997), Cavell (1994), Sedgwick and Parker (1995), Gould (1995), Hillis Miller (2007), Hamacher (2008), Fritsch (2013), Mercier (2016). For an excellent analysis of the “deconstructive gesture” in the history of performativity studies, see Senatore (2013).

⁹ Recently, Butler (2020) tried to conceptualize a certain “force of nonviolence” — a rather traditional gesture which I aimed to problematize, also with reference to the work of Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben, in my essay “Texts on Violence: Of the Impure (Contaminations, Equivocations, Trembling)” (Mercier 2020). See also Mercier 2016.

somewhat tautological. “Force” is tautology as a question, as a problem — a “problem,” *probléma*, that is to say, that which is thrown ahead of us, before us, in *front* of us: as a question, as an advance, an obstacle, but also as an excuse, a pretext and perhaps a magical way-out. The use of the notion of force is always an excuse, a mask, a front, a way of avoiding other questions — for instance: questions of *meaning*, as Austin would say. This problem was a constant concern for Derrida:¹⁰

The word force is indeed very obscure. [...] Force is basically a very common name for designating that for which we do not have a clearly expressible concept in a given philosophical code. In philosophy, the value of force has always been in representing what resisted conceptual analysis. Hence the risk. (2002b, 35)

Force is a *front*, a façade — but a paradoxical one, for it is the other of the phenomenon. Force is the front of an apparition, of an appearing: the front of a front, so to speak, since it is the front of a *phainesthai* — it is *another* front, but one located before the phenomenon and already behind, placed *in lieu of origin*. Derrida made a similar analysis in “Force and Signification,” one of his first published works, with reference to Hegel:

To say that force is the origin of the phenomenon is to say nothing. As soon as it is articulated [*dite*], force is already a phenomenon. Hegel demonstrated convincingly that the explication of a phenomenon by a force is a tautology. But in saying this, one must refer to [*viser*] a certain incapacity [*impuissance*] of language to exit from itself in order to say its origin, and not to the *thought* of force. Force is the other of language without which language would not be what it is. (1978, 31; translation modified)

So that, whenever we speak about “force,” we’re *fronting*: we’re acting like we *know* more than we actually do. It’s a *performance*. But the language of force,

¹⁰ On Derrida’s reservations vis-a-vis the lexicon of “force,” and on an excessive, self-deconstructive or self-interrupting “force” in/of *différance*, see for example Derrida 1986, 11 and 33–34; 1988, 149–50; 2002b, 34–37; Derrida and Calle-Gruber 2006, 17–18. See also Gasché (2016). These reservations appear front and center in Derrida’s “Force of Law” (2002a, 230–98): “it is always a matter of differential force, of difference as difference of force, of force as *différance* or force of *différance* (*différance* is a force *différée-différente*); it is always a matter of the relation between force and form, between force and signification, of “performative” force, illocutionary or perlocutionary force, of persuasive force and of rhetoric, of affirmation of signature, but also and above all, of all the paradoxical situations in which the greatest force and the greatest weakness strangely exchange places [*s’échangent étrangement*]. And that is the whole story, the whole of history. What remains is that I have always been uncomfortable with the word *force* even if I have often judged it indispensable” (234–35). Force — interrupted — remains.

be it used in descriptive, prescriptive, or critical terms, is never as *strong*, as powerful or forceful, as “knowing” as it may appear, and it may always be turned into a language of impotency, impower or *impuissance*.

Here I’m speaking about force. I might be fronting.

As a matter of illustration, Austin’s recourse to the notion of “force” in *How To Do Things With Words* was never quite justified conceptually, and remains enveloped in a certain mystique. It could be said that Austin’s introduction of the logic of force into his inaugural theory of performativity itself intervenes as a *coup de force* — a forceful gesture which has been repeated by the whole tradition of performativity studies, even when it was a matter of criticizing Austin.

Why does Austin feel the need to introduce the notion of force in his elaboration of speech act theory? The explanation for this decision is never made crystal clear, but it is initially related to a certain pragmatics of the performative, *as opposed to* the purely referential character of constative language. In his helpful book *Performativity*, James Loxley attempted to justify Austin’s use of the term “force” as follows: “Since this is a question not of what the utterance means or refers to but of what it is or does, Austin describes it as its illocutionary *force*” (2007, 18). Certainly, this precision does not fully clarify Austin’s (or anyone’s) use of the language of “force.” But it is interesting. It provides us with some *context*. I repeat: “Since this is a question not of what the utterance means or refers to but of what it *is* or *does*, Austin describes it as its illocutionary *force*.” I emphasized “is” and “does.” The use of these verbs suggests that there is a certain *force* in *doing* and/or *being* (as opposed to simply “meaning” or “referring,” such as is the case for the so-called “constative” — which would thus be forceless). There would thus be some performative force in being oneself the event or the performance that the speech act *does* in *being*, or *is* in *doing*. Performativity thus supposes an ontology of the performative event “as such,” that is, of the event understood as some decidable substance or act (a speech *act*, which immediately *is* or *does*, and thereby exerts a certain *force* in *being* or *doing*). This suggests a performative ontology relying on an ontology of force — the forcefulness of an “act,” the *doing* of an act identified with its force. There would be force in “being” and in “doing,” and this is what “performativity” designates.

Loxley’s interpretation is based on the fact that Austin invokes the concept of force as a consequence of his initial distinction between constative and performative, a distinction which intervenes pretty early in the *How To Do Things With Words* lectures. The theory of performativity implies a specific conceptualization of “the force of the utterance *as opposed to* its meaning” (Austin 1962, 33; I emphasize “as opposed to”). Subsequently, Austin keeps using the term “force,” a term repeated and reiterated all through the elaboration of speech act

theory, and this without further clarification or thematization. And, in the last few lectures of *How To Do Things With Words*, wherein Austin introduces his theory of the “total speech act,” “force” becomes attached to the *illocutionary* act, *not* with the *locutionary* act. Austin thus preserves, through the localized use of force, something of the initial distinction between constative and performative — indeed repeating, differently, more subtly, his initial force/meaning distinction. “Force” is one of the notions which survives from the initial constative/performative distinction (which Austin later abandons, or complicates) to Austin’s subsequent elaboration of the “total speech act” — after a “fresh start” — in the last lectures:

Forgetting for the time the initial distinction between performatives and constatives and the programme of finding a list of explicit performative words, notably verbs, we made a fresh start by considering the senses in which to say something is to do something. Thus we distinguished the locutionary act (and within it the phonetic, the phatic, and the rhetic acts) which has a *meaning*; the illocutionary act which has a certain *force* in saying something; the perlocutionary act which is *the achieving of certain effects* by saying something. (1962, 120)

In “Signature Event Context,” Derrida interprets Austin’s recourse to the notion of force as a Nietzschean inflection:

Austin was obliged to free the analysis of the performative from the authority of the *value of truth*, from the true/false opposition, at least in its classical form, and to substitute for it at times the value of force, of difference of force (*illocutionary or perlocutionary force*). (In this line of thought, which is nothing less than Nietzschean, this in particular strikes me as moving in the direction of Nietzsche himself, who often acknowledged a certain affinity for a vein of English thought). (1988, 13; translation modified)

Derrida’s mentioning of “perlocutionary force,” in the above quote, will become central in my argument on Butler. But before we get there, let’s dwell a moment on Austin’s supposedly “Nietzschean” recourse to force. Derrida makes a suggestive point here, but his interpretation is somewhat problematic for a simple reason: “force” in Austin’s speech act theory is attached *only* to the *illocutionary* act, and *never* to the *perlocutionary* act. Against Derrida, I want to emphasize that Austin, to my knowledge, never spoke of “*perlocutionary force*.” Certainly, Derrida’s commentary is somewhat cautious, but it is not certain that Austin is as much of a “Nietzschean” as Derrida would like him to be. Stanley Cavell made this point quite convincingly in *A Pitch of Philosophy* (1994, 80-2). All through *How To Do Things With Words*, Austin strives to keep “force” at-

tached to the *illocutionary* act itself — and *not* to the whole pragmatics of language (for instance, language in its constative, communicative, or interpretative dimension). Austin never uses the expressions “locutionary force” or “perlocutionary force” — only “*illocutionary* force”. Even in the “total speech act” elaborated by Austin in the last lectures, he is very careful to locate force in the “illocutionary act” only. It follows that matters of “truth” or “meaning” remain (at least in theory) very much separated from “force” — I repeat: at least *in theory* (which is another way of saying: at least on the *constative* level). This is what justifies Stanley Cavell in his critique of Derrida’s interpretation of Austin. Cavell argues that Austin’s performative ontology is not an ontology of “force” per se — it is, in fact, an ontology of *success* (more on this below).

Nevertheless, the dualism meaning/force remains the theoretical spine of Austin’s pragmatics of language — but as such it remains uninterrogated. This is all the more problematic because, in the last lectures of *How To Do Things With Words*, Austin explicitly strives to blur the distinction between performative and constative, since these two dimensions co-exist within the same speech act, “the total speech act.” And, ultimately, Austin is led to admit that a constative statement may only be deemed true or false depending on the context of utterance — and thus on a certain *illocutionary force*:

“true” and “false” [...] do not stand for anything simple at all; but only for a general dimension of being a right or proper thing to say as opposed to a wrong thing, in these circumstances, to this audience, for these purposes and with these intentions (1962, 144)

It follows that

the truth or falsity of a statement depends not merely on the meanings of words but on what act you were performing in what circumstances. (144)

Austin thus puts emphasis on the “effects,” the effectivity, the “force” of the speech act, and on the “capacity” of the actors to perform a speech act according to the norms or conventions which may validate (or not) the speech act, thus giving it illocutionary force. Performativity then refers to the capacity, the power to enact the illocutionary force of the speech act, a force which also conditions the rightfulness or properness of the constative statement — and this should, ultimately, include and affect any and all theoretical statement, any “theory,” for instance: “performativity theory,” “speech act theory,” “political” or “social theory,” “queer theory,” and so on. With this move, Austin’s “theory” tends to confer to the concept of force a virtually limitless extension. The notion of “force” and that of “truth” find themselves co-implicated through what resem-

bles an irreducible tautology, directly affecting the characterisation of performativity as that which supposedly modifies "the natural course of events" (Austin 1962, 116).

Before we can examine what is made of the notion of "performative force" in Butler's *Excitable Speech*, I must first say a few more words about the distinction between "illocutionary force" and "perlocutionary act" in Austin's work — a distinction which is not always well understood or articulated, including by Derrida, and especially by Butler (Cavell criticizes Butler on this specific point in *A Pitch of Philosophy* [1994, 200–1]). While "illocutionary force" designates the very act or existence or being of the speech act as such, its force as existence or act, its very success as event, its "being" as "doing" (its force *tout court*, then), the perlocutionary act merely concerns the *effects* achieved by the speech act. Now, the common understanding (which seems to be Butler's, for example) is that the force of the speech act (what she often calls "performative force") is directly translated into its effects: in this perspective, force would thus conflate with "effectivity" in the sense of "efficacy," or "consequentiality" — and this effectivity would testify to the success of the performative, to its force as such, as performative. However, according to Austin, "illocutionary force" does not depend on the effects of the speech act at all (that is, all that which constitutes the "perlocutionary act"). In theory, a speech act can be successfully performed, and thus display "illocutionary force," without having any effects. In this case, the perlocutionary act itself would be null. All this might seem rather abstract, but it is an important nuance, one which concerns the distinction between "illocutionary force" on the one hand, and "perlocutionary effects" or "act" on the other hand. Austin never uses the phrase "perlocutionary force" (again, Derrida seems to misinterpret Austin on this matter, at least in "Signature, Event, Context"). "Force," according to Austin, has nothing to do with perlocutionary effects, or with the intentionality/effectivity duo, that is, the potential adequation between the effects of the speech act and the initial intentions of the locutor — an adequation which may always be pondered, assessed, evaluated in retrospect. Rather, force "as such," what Austin calls "illocutionary force," has to do with the effectivity of the speech act "itself" — its "being" or "doing" — independently from its effects; "illocutionary force" has thus to do with conventionality, that is to say the valid repetition, the conformity with, and enactment of prior rules or norms, all that which makes the speech act *successful as a speech act* — for example, what makes an order *successful as an order*, and this whatever its effects. In other words, Austin does not define "illocutionary force" according to an instrumental teleology, even though illocutionary force might always be attached to prior intentions and to a teleology which may *then* be evaluated in relation to the perlocutionary effects of the speech act. Let's take an example: if I perform an order, it will *still* be an order even if my interlocutors refuse to obey. It *is* an order as

such, it *is* what it *does*, “ordering,” and its performance as order is *successful* as such, as an order, even though it does not result in the effects I intended, that is, obedience. An order is an order even if it is not obeyed. It thus has performative, illocutionary force. Such order may trigger any type of response — for instance, effects such as obedience, disobedience, rebellion, or anything between or beyond these notions. Whatever the order’s effects, and even if it does not result in any effects at all, an order is still an order if it did conform to what makes an order an order — and in this respect it does have performative force, “illocutionary force.”

This suggests a certain paradox: although Austin makes repeated use of the concept of force in *How To Do Things With Words*; and although this concept is essential and strategically necessary in his argumentation in order to distinguish “force” from “meaning” (and thus the performative from the constative dimensions), Austin’s concept of force is also, paradoxically, not much at all. “Force” is barely anything at all. “Force” can be pretty weak, and ineffective. It merely designates a force of enactment, a validating repetition, a finishing stroke recognising the “success” of the speech act as such, as “being” or “doing” what it “is” or “does,” as being the act that it does in being itself the force that it manifests — and that’s it. In all rigour, it need not have any effects.

However, once we have said this, an immense question remains: what are the criteria to assess and acknowledge illocutionary force *as such*, and thus to assess the *success* of a performative? How can we “detect” force and thus decide that a performative was performed successfully? According to Austin (and Cavell), if you refuse to obey, this refusal does not cancel the “illocutionary force” of the order: refusal simply concerns the “perlocutionary effects” of the speech act. An order remains an order even when it does not result in obedience. In the case of disobedience, one may hypothesize that the speech act results in a conflict of forces — a performative force against another performative force, that of the order against that of disobedience (speech act versus speech act) — one that could be tentatively explained through, for example, a social analysis of the context of utterance.¹¹ However, in practice, the boundary is not this clear-cut between, for instance, the effectivity of the illocutionary act (*it exists in effect*: it has illocutionary force, it is successful *as a speech act*) and the effects of the performative as perlocutionary act (*it results in effects*, perlocutionary effects which affect the present situation: it is successful in “producing” effects).

¹¹ This is the basis for Bourdieu’s sociological take on Austin’s theory of performativity, which he notably combines with Max Weber’s sociology of legitimacy and his own theory of habitus, partly inspired by Marcel Mauss. See Bourdieu 1991. On the political and theoretical problems resulting from thinking performativity together with legitimacy, coalescing around the aporias of what I call a “socio-ontology of success,” see Mercier 2016.

This ambiguity is due to a problem related to what I have called, in previous works, the “ontology of success” (see Mercier 2016; 2022b). My claim is that the ontological discourse can only operate through a preconception of what “success” *is*; however, what we call “success” does not stand for anything simple at all. “Success” depends *not only* on prior agreements on rules, conventions, conditions of authority, legitimation or norms which make such or such “act” an “order” (for example), a *successful* order (even if it does not result in any effects); *but also* on the *legibility* and *interpretability* of such rules, conventions, conditions of legitimation or norms. “Success” is never self-explanatory: it remains to be *read*. It must itself be interpreted, that is, constated. And this constative dimension can never be fully separated for a certain performative dimension (as Austin [1962, 144] himself admits when he speaks about matters of falsity and truth). Certainly, an order can be said to have been “performed” even if it has not been followed by obedience (or disobedience); but it will be *more easily* interpreted as an order if it is *taken* as an order, interpreted *as such* by all the interlocutors (including the performing actor, and the social scientist), thereby resulting in obedience and/or disobedience. “Obedience” or “disobedience,” or whatever is *interpreted* as such, will always testify to some performative order (even if that’s only in retrospect). Conversely, if something happens which is interpreted neither as “obedience” nor as “disobedience” (and which could be anything between or beyond these categories), it will be *more difficult* to interpret the supposed performative as an “order” and, following, as a “successful” order, as a successful speech act with illocutionary force. In such cases, one could say (to return to my introductory remarks) that it would be *barely* an order and, perhaps, *barely* a political act, *barely* an act of *power*. In fact, in such cases, it becomes difficult, maybe impossible, to localise the performative “act” as such. The legibility of the illocutionary “force” and of performative “success” thus depends, at least partly, but irreducibly, on the readability or interpretability of its perlocutionary effects.

In other words, it is difficult to know for sure whether the validation of the speech act as *successful* (and thus the constative ratification of its illocutionary *force*) depends, or not, on its perlocutionary effects. Actually, it is more than difficult. It is impossible. Undecidable. And this for one more reason: indeed, the question remains to know whether this interpretative effort, the supposed constative through which the interlocutors (or the social scientist herself) agree or disagree on the definition of a performative, on the determination of its so-called “context” and on the evaluation of its “success” (which remains indispensable for validating the success of the speech act as such, and therefore its illocutionary force as a performative, even its existence *tout court*) — the question remains to know, then, whether this interpretative “process” or “scene” (for lack of better

words) belongs to the illocutionary act “as such,” or if it should already be considered as one of its perlocutionary effects. This difficulty structurally challenges the theoretical conditions for interpreting and isolating the speech act as such, and especially for localizing its illocutionary force, in contrast to its perlocutionary effects.

In this picture, force “as such” would elude or exceed constative knowledge — it becomes undecidable, hinging on another constative to come, on another interpretation itself attached to another illocutionary force which must itself be attested, validated, ratified, constated, etc. There cannot be any strictly constative — theoretical or scientific — discourse on performative force, and on the speech act as such.¹² Under these circumstances, the “total speech act” theorized by Austin can never become captured by any constative or performative. The “total speech act” is itself divided and severed from itself, interpretable, “iterable” (Derrida 1988). It is at once itself but already otherly — itself *as* otherly: performativity is without origin or end because the constation of its success “as such” remains to come. The “act” is always-already divided, differing from itself through the logic of performative interpretability. Who or what does make an order successful, if not its interpretation as such (as an order)? But because the “as such” of the performative “success” also depends on the full stabilisation of an interpretation, itself interpretable, such “success” remains to come. This structure of the “to-come” signifies that what we call “success” is quite as much a form of “fallibility.” As we shall see, the structure of iterability unsettles the conditions of what makes a “performative” a performative, of what makes an “order” an order, of what makes a “political act” a political act, of what makes “power”

¹² At a general epistemic level, this undecidability, in the last instance, between constative and performative signifies that the theorisation of performativity implies an uncontrollable *mise en abyme*, an irreducible overdetermination of *praxis* by *theoria* and of *theoria* by *praxis*: will it ever be possible to *know*, to produce a thoroughly constative theorisation of performativity, and to define (ontologically) what a performative exactly “is”? In a text written in 1980, Derrida emphasized the irreducibly performative, and thus ultimately undecidable, character of performativity *as* theory: “In speaking of performativity, I think as much of performativity as the output of a technical system, in that place where knowledge and power are no longer distinguished, as of Austin’s notion of a speech act not confined to stating, describing, saying that which is, but producing or transforming, by itself, under certain conditions, the situation of which it speaks [...]. Interesting and interested debates that are developing more and more around an interpretation of the performative power of language seem linked, in at least a subterranean way, to urgent politico-institutional stakes. These debates are developing equally in departments of literature, linguistics, and philosophy [this text was written in 1980; needless to say, the conceptuality attached to performativity has spread, since then, far beyond these three disciplines or departments]; and in themselves, in the form of their interpretative statements, they are neither simply theoretico-constative nor simply performative. This is so because *the* performative does not exist: there are various performatives, and there are antagonistic or parasitical attempts to interpret the performative power of language, to police it and use it, to invest it performatively. And a philosophy and a politics — not only a general politics but a politics of teaching and of knowledge, a political concept of the university community — are involved there every time, whether or not one is conscious of this” (2004b, 100).

power, and by the same token of what makes “resistance” resistance. It also destabilizes the conditions for positing a theoretical or critical discourse on “the act,” be it in the form of a social science, of a pragmatic theory of performativity, or of a critical ontology of power. The uncanny structure of the “to-come” forbids the strict (theoretical-ontological-constative) localization of force, of the success and of the force of the performative as such. This uncanny structure would constitute, so to speak, an excessive “potency” or “force,” one that would be more originary, prior and stronger than the speech act “itself,” than performativity “itself,” than power “itself,” and in fact prior to force “itself,” because it is prior to the ontological position of the selfness of any self — be it that of the “force” of a performative event.

3. ACT III: THE QUEER FORCE OF RESISTANCE

With all this in mind, let’s return to the problematic of normativity and resistance.

One may very well imagine situations in which an “order” is “obeyed” even though no one in the room even *noticed* that an order was being performed. Without even raising the psychoanalytic question of the unconscious (which we certainly should), these are all the situations in which “actions” or “practices” are supposedly determined by habits, habitus, customs, traditions, tacit or implicit laws, in other words, power structures ingrained in forceful legitimacies — and here I have in mind, notably but not exclusively, that “thing” named the “norm,” the “normativity” of norms, the force, the performative power of “norms” (for instance, *gender norms*), such as described by Foucault or Butler. Norms would indeed operate by enforcing and repeating an order without order, a performative without presence — a performative without “the act,” but not necessarily without force.¹³

But can we imagine a performative without “the act”? Does “performativity” *as theory* have anything to say about the force of norms? This question implies another one: can it be simply said that normativity, the so-called “force” or “power” of norms, may be analysed in terms of performativity? Does it fit “speech act theory” — especially given that norms do not need to be “spoken” as such, in a presence, by a speaker, someone who says “I” — “I order”? Who “speaks” the norm? Who or what speaks for its power of repetition, its repeatability before, or after, the speech act “itself”? And where is performative “force” located if/when no “one” speaks? Where is illocutionary force located when

¹³ On the so-called “force” of norms, see for instance Macherey’s work on Foucault and Canguilhem in Macherey 2009.

there’s no locutor?¹⁴ I say “speak”, referring to the vocality or elocution of a “speech act,” but all these questions can also be raised in relation to the “body,” to the materiality, corporeality, and gestuality of the body, its habitus, which is, according to Butler, the locus of inscription of the norm — and, if there is one, the place of a potential resistance against said norm. The body, bodies, according to Butler, are where the norms take place, and are potentially resisted, subverted, resignified.

Certainly, all these situations, which I am cataloguing here under the vague umbrella-notion of “norm” or “normativity,” would not be described as “performative” by Austin. Similarly, as was already mentioned, Cavell argues that the effects of norms (such as described by Butler) should not be considered as performative in the sense of the illocutionary act, but should rather be considered as perlocutionary effects (in the vague sense of the term). Nevertheless, I believe that Cavell’s critique of Butler is in fact problematic and one-sided, *precisely because* it refuses to account for such vagueness — a vagueness which remains an essential feature of Austin’s speech act theory. Indeed, Butler, in raising these questions and attempting to solve them by using the conceptuality of performativity, points to a difficulty which remained ignored by Austin’s theory (see Butler 1997, 16–18). In their last consequences, Butler’s questions point to the difficulty to isolate and to circumscribe the act “itself” — and, consequently, its *force*. If we admit that “force” is the *doing* of the illocutionary act, that is, its *being* as such, the being-event of its doing, then how are we to understand the power in and of repetition, and more generally the power of norms — norms which are, essentially and structurally, repeatable, and whose functioning as such depends on repeatability? Such “power” or “force” of repetition or repeatability suggests a power beyond performative power, and a force beyond illocutionary force.

In other words, the question of normative repetition points to the possibility that an “act” or “force” need not be *present as such* in order to have forceful effects. In fact, this “iterability” (Derrida 1988), this iterative force beyond presence, is the resource of all displays of power, of all economies, blurring the limit between illocutionary force and perlocutionary effects, and disseminating, differing and deferring “force” and “power” by the same token. In this deconstructive

¹⁴ The questions raised here in relation to the performativity of a so-called “norm” without elocution and without presence, perhaps without “agent” or “agency,” even without “I” or “ipseity,” could also be raised with respect to recent re-elaborations of (queer) performativity, now conceived as posthuman and assigned to “Nature” or “Matter” (Barad 2003; 2011). Beyond the serious problems raised by this forced naturalization of “queer” — what is “queer,” what does “queer” *mean* or *perform*, if Nature is and has always-already been “queer”? (Wilson 2018; Basile 2020) — can such “posthumanist” or “neo-materialist” re-inscription of “performativity” avoid reinstating the metaphysics of presence, the ontology of “force” and “act,” as well as the human and logo-centric representations of language and power and the logic of production and productivity consubstantial with theories of performativity? What of its “own” language, its very force and mark, the violence perhaps of its constative-performative position?

reading of performativity, the force of the performative expands beyond the presence of its present, is deferred and differs from itself, pointing to the power or force of a certain *revenance*, of haunting (Derrida 1986, 11). This spectral expansion before and beyond presence is what defines power. Now, as this spectral force presupposes the blurring (an originary blurring) between illocutionary force and perlocutionary effects of the speech act, such blurring already signifies an uncertainty as to what constitutes “repetition” as such (as repetition becomes originary). But one could see in this troubling uncertainty the possibility for thinking a *different* sort of repetition, a differential repetition: this is what Butler does, in their critical reading of Derrida, in order to think of the conditions of possibility of resistances allowed by the “resignification” and “reappropriation” of norms beyond the tautological structure of performative power: something like a crack in the self-repeating machine, in the performative machinery of power, *la machine performante*.

Here, we must talk about “queer.”

We must, we should, because the motif of “queer performativity” has been instrumental in the thematization of the possibility of performative resistance, reappropriation, and resignification, and in its strategic becoming. “Strategic” because it encompasses both theoretical and practical dimensions (the inseparability of the two dimensions is the undeniable gift of performativity theories), notably (but not only) in the context of gender studies or queer theory. For instance, Sedgwick defines “queer performativity” as “a strategy for the production of meaning and being, in relation to the affect shame and to the later and related fact of stigma” (1993, 11).¹⁵ And “queer,” “a politically potent term,” is thereby said to potentially carry “transformational energy,” “experimental, creative, transformative force” (4). Note the lexicon. Butler, like Sedgwick, remains relatively cautious about the use of “queer,” and in *Bodies that Matter* they call for us to be “critically queer,” which means that we should be queer in a self-critical manner, so that “queer” does not become “itself,” in turn, normative: *queer* should remain plastic, non-normative, non-identificatory — strategic, but not normative. It shouldn’t become normalised or normalising:

If the term “queer” is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes. This also means that it will doubtless have to be yielded in favor of terms that do that political work more effectively. Such a yielding may well become necessary

¹⁵ For a fantastic reading of Sedgwick and Derrida on queer shame and what it implies for thinking deconstructively about materiality and the body, see Timár 2019.

in order to accommodate — without domesticating — democratizing contestations that have and will redraw the contours of the movement in ways that can never be fully anticipated in advance. (Butler 1993, 228)

In *Excitable Speech*, Butler moves to promote what they call “subversive resignification” and “insurrectionary speech.” This is particularly interesting for our argument because this form of speech is explicitly articulated to a certain modification in the notions of “success” and “force” in relation to speech act theory. There, “insurrectionary speech” refers to a performative repetition which *fails*, at least partly, to repeat prior conventions or norms *as such*. It suggests a somewhat *unauthorized* repetition which can thus enact a certain resistance. Such act would have “force” in the sense, not of a strict conformity and validation of preexisting norms, but precisely as an event: that is, a certain *failure* to conform to preexisting norms, a failure producing a “rupture,” instantiating a “break” against the power of norms. It thus signifies, to all intents and purposes, a *successful failure*.¹⁶ The insurrectionary force of this performative would precisely stem from its “unauthorized” character: it “forces change” by repeating language, but by repeating it differently. According to Butler, the type of empowerment suggested by the reappropriation of “queer,” through its bodily re-enactment and linguistic resignification, would thus oppose oppressive norms by performing them through a new lens, producing new practices of power-knowledge — this is what suggests the use, very frequent in Butler’s work, of the adjective “non-normative”: Butler is interested in the non-normative re-enactment of norms. Just like there is good and bad “repetition,” there are normative and non-normative practices, normative or non-normative performative productions, that is, always according to Butler, “bodily production.” The notions of “insurrectionary speech” and “resignification” suggest a mode of resistance that is conceived as local and transitional form of empowerment: performativity against performativity, production against production, power against power — that is, power-relations in the Foucauldian sense of the term: a mobile, circulatory, agonistic relation between heterogeneous, productive forces. “Queer” would be a possible name, an *example* of such resistance through differential repetition and non-normative resignification.

Now, I used the word “example,” but “queer” is *also* more than an example: in the context of gender studies, and certainly beyond, “queer” has become the very name, the “normal” name for that type of “good” repetition, reappropriation

¹⁶ In March 2019, I presented a talk at the Department of Gender Studies of Central European University in Budapest: “Beyond Failure: Queer Theory at the Border.” There, I exposed a series of problems, paradoxes, and ambiguities related to the notion of failure — and “successful failure” — in the work of Judith Butler, Jack Halberstam, and Cynthia Weber. This talk was later developed into a book chapter, “Beyond Failure: Queer Theory’s Fallibilities” (Mercier 2022a), in which I pursue the work done in the present essay through discussions of Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman, José Esteban Muñoz, Gloria Anzaldúa, Finn Enke, and many others.

and resignification, that is to say, for designating a repetition which breaks away from the norm it is supposed to repeat by resisting the norm, by reappropriating the norm, resignifying it by queering it "from a prior usage." "Queering" (the verb, as used for example by Butler in our previous block quotation [1993, 228]) has come to designate the act, the operation, the experience perhaps which consists in repeating the norm differently and, in Butler's words, of possibly "missing the mark," thus opening the norm to a supposedly "new" future — one that is "unanticipated," where and when the normative performance of language "may always go awry," enacting the norm through a certain "non-compliance" with it (2015, 30–32; see also 62–65). This suggests "the possibility of a different sort of repeating" (1988, 520). Let me quote *Excitable Speech*:

The appropriation of such norms to oppose their historically sedimented effect constitutes the insurrectionary moment of that history, the moment that founds a future through a break with that past. (1997, 159)

It is not always clear if "queering" intervenes intentionally or not, consciously or not, and perhaps this question is not decisive in the last instance; nevertheless, what Butler is trying to do is to *identify* this "moment," the "insurrectionary moment," to name and locate the "break," the rupture, that is, *the event*. To this purpose, Butler must localize the performative and its force. In this sense, Butler's overall intent is not so different from Austin's, even though Butler drastically transforms and displaces the conditions of success of the performative: Butler repeats preliminary suppositions of Austin's theory of performativity, but repeats them differently. According to Butler, the condition of success of performative force (a somewhat "non-normative" force, as opposed to the force of norms embedded in power) is a certain *failure* (but a *successful* failure) to repeat its conditions of validity through de-contextualisation, re-enactment, excess, exposition, and bodily production.¹⁷ In this respect, their reading of performativity is indeed indebted to Derrida: if the performative conformed absolutely with prior norms, if it were identical to pre-existing referents or norms, if it merely validated or repeated the conditions of its legitimacy, without any rupture or "distance" of any sort, then it could not be said to produce an event ("to force change") in any meaningful way. It would simply be confused, fused with the norms it merely repeats. Such performative would not even be legible or identifiable as such: it would escape all possibility of representation, interpretation, or assessment. Even its effect of so-called "repetition" or "enactment" would escape visibility or interpretability: it would not constitute an "act," only pure continuity (if such thing

¹⁷ I cannot discuss in detail the difficult matter of corporeality, but for considerations on the body and bodies in deconstruction, and on a body-writing or body-translating which diverges in essential ways, I believe, from what Butler calls "bodily production" — first of all because "To translate is to lose the body" — see Derrida and Grossman (2019, 22); Derrida and Calle-Gruber (2006, 25–29); Mercier and Vráblíková (2019a; 2019b); Eades (2019).

is possible, even imaginable), a pure continuity in the normative or normal fabric of power. Consequently, the performative can never be *entirely* successful or legitimate (in relation to pre-existing norms), or it would disappear as an “event,” as anything. It would disappear *tout court*. In other words, the performative cannot be a full, unmitigated success if it is to “produce” something like an “event” — perhaps the event of “change.”

But what does it mean to “produce” an event? I used the verb “produce” several times in my reading of Butler, and did so on purpose. This aspect was already highlighted by Peggy Kamuf in her important essay “Derrida and Gender: The Other Sexual Difference”: the lexicon of “production” is omnipresent in Butler’s work (Kamuf 2001, 85–88). It is quite obviously reminiscent of Foucault’s conceptualisation of power as immediately *productive*, as constant production of power, of power itself producing knowledge, norms, and more technologies of power-knowledge, and so on. In fact, the logic of production and reproduction is part of the machine, the performing machine (*la machine performante*) which power is. And this is precisely where Derrida’s deconstruction becomes strictly incompatible with Butler’s (and Foucault’s) hermeneutics of power inasmuch as this hermeneutics relies on a logic of production/reproduction. In fact, Butler’s theory of performativity relies on the notion of “production” because it aims to *identify* resistance in opposition to power, as a production of *new* significations or resignifications — “good” repetition, that is, the one that “forces change” — as opposed to the re-production of the norm — “bad” repetition: the mere confirmation of power norms, their sustenance and (re)legitimation. Production against (re)production.¹⁸

This is where Butler quite explicitly departs from Derrida’s deconstructive take on performativity. As we saw in Act I, Butler (1997, 150) marks their difference with Derrida by claiming that his notion of iterability cannot sustain any political analysis of performativity, because it supposes that the iterative force of rupture is a “formal” and “universal” structure in/of writing, which would prevent the identification, distinction, or localisation of performative acts of resistance. At this stage, Butler must presuppose that the force of the performative *can* be identified as such, even though it is in the form of a partial “failure” to conform — this “successful failure” being what produces the event, and therefore ensures the *success* and *force* of the performative act of non-normative enactment, reappropriation, or resignification: resistance, the force and event of resistance in the form of non-normative “insurrectionary speech” or “subversive resignification.” But the risk, here, is that the theoretical necessity to *successfully* identify said

¹⁸ Kamuf (2001, 85) shows that Butler also presupposes a (non-interrogated) distinction between “production” and “inscription.” For a deconstructive analysis of the logic of “re-production” through readings of Marx, Althusser, Derrida, and Kamuf, see Mercier 2021b.

failure as *successful* failure reinstates the ontology of success that was (legitimately) perceived as problematic in Butler’s (and other feminists’ [e.g., Felman 2003]) reading of Austin. Ultimately, the theoretical identification of “performative force” ensures that the event of resistance, the performative act that “forces change,” be identified and recognised as such, beyond doubt, through the assurance of a transcendent constative: for instance, the discourse produced by the political theorist or social scientist. Here, just like Austin before them, Butler must *ultimately* prioritize the constative of the theoretical over the performative “itself” in order to justify and sustain the power and efficacy of their own critical discourse on power — that is, their *own* power (as critical theorist) to identify the *success* of the performative, and the force of “insurrectionary speech” (its success being, in Butler’s view, a partial failure to comply with the norm). But to do so, Butler must erase, at least provisionally, the performative character of the theoretical gesture (theirs, Butler’s, just like anyone’s), and therefore must ignore its potential effects of repetition, validation, conformation, success, and so on — that is, everything that makes the theoretical or critical discourse somewhat *complicit* with its object, at least partly compliant, co-implicated with the norms and power structures that are supposedly being analysed, critiqued, or resisted. Specifically, Butler must ignore the performative dimension of the constative (in its critical-theoretical expression), a performative dimension which is itself suggestive of a potential “impurity” (to speak like Butler) — that is, a certain repetitiveness or normativity, a citationality suggesting a potential complicity with normative power. The *possibility* of such impurity and complicity remains *irreducible*; and the irreducible possibility of this originary impurity is the locus wherein the normative and the non-normative must become undecidable in the last instance.

In other words, the successful *recognition* of performative success (that is, in Butler’s theory, a certain failure to conform with norms) presupposes the normativity of a certain code which is itself repeatable, entailing that it is enmeshed with power, its norms and structures, its institutions, starting (why not?) with the institution of language “itself,” the very matter of words — and this repeatability and enmeshment with power at the level of the theoretical discourse of and on performativity remains uninterrogated in Butler’s critique of power. So that “queer,” for instance, the “word” and the “thing,” even though it is introduced as a disruption or deviation in/from the power “machine,” must itself be inscribed, and introduced with all its “machinery” in order to remain legible, intelligible, identifiable, recognisable, interpretable — in short, *constated*. I cannot explore this problem in detail here, but this codified “machinery,” which must also involve a certain repeatability and normativity, may include: a somewhat pre-deconstructive (and pre-psychoanalytic) circumscription and representation of the limits of “sex,” “sexuality,” and “sexual difference”; a certain repertoire of normative or non-normative “sexual practices” and “bodily functions” or “discursive

productions”; a preunderstanding of what a “body,” a *human* “body,” is; the whole discourse of and on power, performativity, and gender it is infused with; the hermeneutics of subjectivity and of the subject, understood as *human* subject, and conceived as a potential *agent* of “political” or “social” change; the conceptualization of liberation and empowerment as subjective or ipseic appropriation (or reappropriation), itself indexed on what Derrida calls “the logic of the proper” — in brief, a whole machinery, a certain language, an inscribed idiom, and with it all the sociolinguistic, cultural, and theoretical clichés “queer” has become associated with, all that which Butler calls elsewhere the “presentist” categories of the norm (1993, 227 and 282) contributing to the potential “domestication” of “queer.” Through critical theorisation, “queer” *states itself*, constatively and performatively. “Queer” must present itself; it must “inscribe” itself, in a certain language (English), and in doing so it tends to codify itself, ontologise itself, thus resisting its “own” queerness. Because it is from the outset enmeshed with linguistic, sexual, and socio-political codes, and because it depends on such codes in order to remain legible and recognizable, communicable and transmittable, “queer” is always-already exposed to becoming complicit with “the norm,” whatever its form: homonormativity, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, neoliberal normativity, racial or socio-cultural norms, humanist and anthropocentric reductions, speciesism, agential and/or structural representations of power, and so on and so forth.¹⁹

At this stage, where is power, and where is resistance? Who speaks for one or the other? Where is the machine, and where is its other — the machine’s “own” resistance? What constitutes a “good” repetition — a *reappropriation* or *resignification*? Who has the *power* and the *right* to speak *for* “queer”? And who has the power and the right to speak *for* those who speak *for* “queer”? Who or what can speak *in the name of* queer? What *happens* in that name — “queer”? Can we think something like a “queer” machine — beyond the success/failure opposition, and perhaps beyond the power/resistance logic? Perhaps beyond performativity? And force “itself”?

4. ACT IV: LOCATING THE FORCE OF THE EVENT

Those questions are not meant to find easy answers. They concern the designation of the performative “as such” — that is, the designation of the event of a performative “rupture” or “break,” one which could instantiate the force of a resistance, of a resignification “as such,” of a transformation located *in a presence*, in a “moment” in time. This designation, be it Austin’s or Butler’s, ultimately

¹⁹ See also Sedgwick 1993, 15. The question of queer’s (and queer theory’s) necessary idiomatic inscription, of the necessity of its translatable untranslatability, always invested by desire and haunted by sexual difference, is at the heart of Mercier 2022a.

depends on some constative, and thus on some forceful ontological gesture which cannot account for its own performance as event and/or repetition. Such ontological position is “itself” a forceful gesture, an act of performative ontologisation involving the forceful reduction of the event, reducing its excessive eventness through a (violent) stabilization and localization of forces and/or significations. The notion of performative force thus remains tautological. In the notional triangle (performativity/force/ontology), performativity seems to instantiate *the force of ontology* itself: ontology *as force*, understood as a force of presencing, of making-present, of stabilizing the event — unless it signifies the ontological positing of force *as such*, the positing of *force* perhaps constituting the ontological positing *par excellence*. In the uncanny circularity of this quasi-triangular tautology, performativity would instantiate ontology at its most *powerful* and *successful* — that is to say, at its most performative.

Can we think resistance without this reliance on the onto-tautological logic of performative success? And what would this mean in terms of resistance against power, gender norms, or any form of hegemonic discourses indexed on sex, race, class, ableism, cisgenderism, speciesism, human exceptionalism, and so on and so forth? Can we *resist* beyond the success/failure dichotomy, beyond presentist categories that make up “success” and/or “failure” — since one can easily, as demonstrated above, be turned inside out into the other?

If it is to “produce” an event, a performative must involve a rupture of context, some interpretative-performative gesture vis-à-vis existing norms, and must thus expose itself, from the onset, to counter-interpretations: the conditions of its success are also the conditions of its failure. The performative is both repetition *and* opening, self-legitimizing and always-already hospitable to alternative readings threatening its capacity to perform the very event to which it binds itself. It implies *both* conventional success (be it in the *form* of “failure”) and failure (be it in the *form* of “success”), *both at once and/or in turn*. As a result, its conditions of success/failure must remain to come, as the performative opens itself to other protocols of legitimation, legitimacies-to-come. This structural undecidability between success and failure signifies, at heart, an intercontamination and a co-implication, which in previous works I attempted to theorise as a “fallibility” of the performative (Mercier 2016; 2022b). But why insist on “fallibility” rather than “failure”? Simply because, in order to determine an undeniable failure, one that would be absolutely certain and decidable as “non-success,” we would still have to rely on some performative power or transcendental agency, in the form of some sovereign decision based on conditions of legitimacy-illegitimacy. By contrast, the fallibility of the performative (fallible in the face of the event) maintains the undecidability and suggests the coming of the other beyond ontological success or failure:

The event belongs to a *perhaps* that is in keeping not with the possible but with the impossible. And its force is therefore irreducible to the force or the power of a performative, even if it gives to the performative itself, to what is called the *force* of the performative, its chance and its effectiveness.

The force of the event is always stronger than the force of a performative. In the face of what arrives to me, what happens to me, even in what I decide [...], in the face of the other who arrives and arrives to me, all performative force is overrun, exceeded, exposed. (Derrida, 2002c: 235)

However, this differential play between forces (performative/event) is *not dialectical* or *oppositional: sensu stricto*, it is not simply a play between discreet forces, but a play internal to the performative structure itself, and to force “itself.” It is at work not only between different performatives or speech “acts,” but also within each and every performative “itself,” signifying its intrinsic heterogeneity and divisibility: its own self-difference and self-resistance, all that which makes the “selfness” of the act radically impossible. Heterogeneity is before the speech act, before its power as “act,” and before force “itself.” It *resists* before the selfness of an act, of any act, and of any so-called “force.” It follows that the differential play of force we are talking about here cannot simply be described as relation between forces: the “performative” or “metaperformative” structure described by Derrida (2005c, 92) cannot simply espouse the power/resistance scheme, even, for instance, in its most sophisticated Foucauldian re-elaboration (which remains Butler’s matricial interpretative model when it comes to thinking normativity and resignification or “insurrectionary speech”). But this structure cannot, either, be reduced to performative paralysis, to some political helplessness or powerlessness due to the all-encompassing character of iterability, as suggested by Butler in their critique of Derrida. *If* there is “resistance” — maybe a “force” of resistance — it must be thought beyond performativity, that is to say, beyond the ontological logic of power, and before the reduction of force to a “performative” force. Beyond performativity theories, Derrida attempts to think a pre- or meta-performative force of the event which exceeds conditions of success/failure. It suggests a force before and beyond power, subjunctive rather than indicative, and therefore unconditional: an uncanny force or *dynamis* signifying the potency of a “might” (*puissance*) which cannot realise itself or be ontologised, precisely because its essence (without essence) is to resist actualisation or ontologisation.²⁰ However, this force of unpower is *not something else than the performative*: it is perhaps beyond power but not outside power; beyond-within,

²⁰ On *dynamis* and *puissance* in relation to Derrida’s “force of the event”, see Mercier 2018.

it is nothing but power “itself,” power’s *différance*, its “own” excess: performative/event in *différance*, in heterogeneous co-implication.

This is why the force of the event cannot give rise to an ontological discourse. It cannot be stabilized in the form of a discourse on the truth of being, on force, or on the act as such. It remains enveloped in the mystique of an “as if.” Certainly, the event can always be read, interpreted, and can therefore always become the object of a theoretical (constative and performative) discourse, however fabular or fictional; yet, for the same reasons, it cannot be reduced to it. Irreducibly phantasmatic, but nevertheless perhaps “realer” than reality “as such,” “realer” than reality “itself,” the force of the event signals the irresistible heterogeneity at work in the ontological position of the constative or performative discourse.²¹ It cannot but de-power the ontological gesture. But for the same reasons it is *also* what gives it power. The (ontological) position of the performative always presupposes this unconditional force because it must remain open to constative readings and interpretations, legitimations and confirmations, so as to remain legible and to potentially be read as “successful” — which signifies that performative power depends on its “own” impotency and *impouvoir*, that is, its “own” heterogeneity and fallibility. The force of the performative thrives on its “own” weakness or powerlessness because it presupposes the coming of *another* force, perhaps the same, already promised and therefore at work in the here-and-now. This promise *dépose*: it works in posing, disposing *and* destituting the force of the performative by opening it up to its own heterogeneity or difference: “When the other comes, there is no performative. The other’s coming outstrips any performative force or power” (Derrida 2004a, 39). This evental force of othering and differentiality cannot present itself, but it is nevertheless a force stronger, more irresistible, despite its structural weakness or forcelessness, than any localised forces or powers — be they interpreted as “normative” or “non-normative,” “obedient” or “insurrectionary,” “repetition” or “change,” “power” or “resistance,” “productive” or “reproductive,” and so on and so forth.

In its last consequences, the aporetic structure (“performative/event”) I here describe supposes the notion of a machine performing *as* it fails to do so, or failing *as* it performs — or perhaps something else entirely: a monstrously impossible machine-event (see Derrida 2002c, 73–74). This is anything but socio-political paralysis: in the *aporia*, and *because of the aporia*, something comes, already, and comes with the propulsive force of a non-ontologisable and non-appropriable event: an event coming, without coming into being, coming beyond presentist reductions, social, political or juridical categorisations of the event — something like self-deconstruction at work: unconditional resistance as originary unpower,

²¹ On the problematic co-implication of reality, phantasmaticity, and event in Malabou and Derrida, see Mercier 2021a.

resistance before selfhood, and before the success/failure dichotomy: self-resistance, resistance before the self, the selfness of any self. It is on the backdrop of this “unconditional resistance” (Derrida 2002c, 204) that all social or political theories, all critical discourses on power and/or resistance become possible. But it is also what forces their deconstruction by pointing to their structural fallibility as constative or performative discourses positing the truth of being, the truth of the event (the so-called “political” or “social” event): it monstrosities their fallibility as ontological discourses *of* and *on* power. The originary unpower which is the signature of the event signals the fallibility and deconstructibility *of* power, but also of critical discourses *on* power, in and through the complicity these two might always share. This work, or movement, or force of deconstruction may certainly have “political” implications (in Butler’s sense of the term), but it also exceeds the limits of that “thing” we call “politics.” In this sense, yes, Derrida’s “force of the event” is “barely” political, but this is because it supposes the deconstructive questioning of what is placed under that old name, “politics”: it “forces change” in a way that cannot be reduced to so-called “political” change, first and foremost because it leads, or works, or forces to rethink the limits of the political by liberating what one calls “the political” from the authority of the ontological question, and thereby from traditional theories of power, themselves indexed on a series of ontological presuppositions and stabilizations. By the same token, it forces to reconsider traditional oppositions undergirding said ontologies, such as: repetition and change; identity and difference; reproduction and production; force and weakness; power and unpower; possibility and impossibility; machine and event; necessity and chance.

5. ACT V: “I WILL NO LONGER USE THE WORD FORCE”

Let’s now conclude on “force.” I say “conclude” because it would seem that we should now be done with the notion of force, right? What’s the deal with “force”? Why still using that old name? Why persisting in repeating it?

In the 1987 interview “Negotiations,” Derrida declared: “Perhaps, for these very reasons, one should no longer use the word ‘force.’ [...] In another context and at another moment, I will no longer use the word force” (2002b, 36). “Perhaps,” he said, perhaps performatively. But can we avoid speaking about force? And, in a sense, can we speak about anything else?

The fact is that Derrida kept using the language of force until the very end, *repeating* force, each time differently, forging or re-using expressions such as “performative force,” “pre-performative force,” “force of law,” “force of the event,” “weak force,” “force without power,” “force without force,” “messianic force,” “force of resistance,” “vulnerable force,” and so on, and so forth, and so force. (See Derrida 1992; 1994; 2002a; 2002c; 2005c, etc.)

The ultimate paradox, perhaps, is that the best way, or the worst way, of making oneself unaware of the problem of force is to actually produce a *theory* of force — or, in other words, to attempt to stabilize force into an ontological concept. In doing so, one ignores the presencing force of this stabilisation, that is, of ontologization. But who can deny the force of this ontological gesture, that is, the force of ontology before and beyond ontology? (Another way of saying: one can *only* deny it.) All ontological gesture, all theoretical position always-already alienates itself through the force which precedes and exceeds its performative position. Such force is its condition of possibility and impossibility. The work and movement of its deconstruction.

In the 1993 conference given after Louis Marin’s death, “By Force of Mourning,” Derrida explained:

Force itself — by preceding and thus violating in advance, in some sense, the possibility of a question concerning it — force itself would trouble, disturb, dislocate the very form of the question “what is?,” the imperturbable “what is?,” the authority of what is called the ontological question. (Derrida 1996, 174)

This is why force, at bottom, remains non-ontologisable and incommunicable. There is nothing more universal, but also more untranslatable, than the singular force of the event, the secret force of singularity, maybe my “own” singularity. There is nothing more universal than being oneself or, in other words, than being different from oneself — *differing* from oneself. Force is the other of being, without which there would be no being — which is another way of saying, to “repeat” Derrida one last time: “To be is to be queer.”²²

²² Derrida (2005a), 703. See also Royle (2009). On the multiple forces, traces, and vertiginous paradoxes at work in this late “slogan” of deconstruction, see Bennington 2017. I explore some of those in Mercier 2022a. Here again, *pace* Butler, what’s at stake is not *simply* a “universal” or “formal” structure of being/queer, but a certain politics of singularity and of “queer” as always singular inscription, as fallible translation and substitution of the unsubstitutable — a politics counting with the *insisting* and *resisting* force of what remains, at bottom, *irreplaceable* and *inappropriable*.

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