Le Scandale du corps parlant selon Shoshana Felman
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The inherent but necessary contradictions in any linguistic body examined analytically, the wilfully imposed criteria of unresolved perhaps even unresolvable action as the theatre for narcissistic gesture, and the total suspension of teleological and interpersonal concerns are the three main foci of Shoshana Felman's *Le Scandale du corps parlant*. The book is divided into four sections. The first is a minute exegesis of J.L. Austin's linguistic theories. Felman describes Austin's concept of performative utterances and locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. The second applies Austin's analytic method to Molière's *Don Juan*. The third applies the psycholinguistic structure of Don Juan's discourse to Austin's philosophical method and discusses Émile Benveniste's objections and amendments to Austin's theories. The concluding section is a rather daring attempt to use Lacan, Freud, Barthes, and Baudelaire to psychoanalyze Austin's choice and use of language in certain fragments of his philosophical papers.

Since Felman's explanation of J.L. Austin's theories is clear and complete, I will concentrate on the second section of the book. In 'La Perversion de la promesse: Don Juan et la performance littéraire,' Felman presents us with a literary text seen as the interplay of opposing, even contradictory concepts of language. The dynamic tension in Molière's *Don Juan* is psycho-linguistic. Each character's interpretation of words determines the form and content of his/her response and actions. The central psychological question is that of non-interruption or continuity. For Don Juan this is continual pleasure, the uninterrupted anticipation and enjoyment of sensual engagement. For the women this is continual constancy of the promise of marriage and the anticipation of sanctified love. Both interpretations are revealed by Molière as illusions. When Molière presents the audience with both illusions simultaneously, we experience agonizingly amusing black humour. For Don Juan, the mythological personage of a devil legend, language does not have transcendant truth. For the others, '... le langage — en tant que champ

constatif de connaissance — est référentiel, capable de référence transitive’ (italics added, p. 43). For Don Juan the promise is a mechanism to avoid death, a mechanism to transgress the limits of being. For the others, the promise has substantial validity: ‘... toute promesse promet avant tout la constance ... la continuité dans le temps entre l'acte d'engagement et l'action future’ (p. 45).

Don Juan's significant shift of pronouns from the first person pronoun to the second and third in intimate conversations, subverts the closure of the verbal assertion of sanctity and allows him to revel in the hidden expression of narcissistic seduction. Don Juan is, essentially and definitionally, one. The promise of heaven is transcendence of death; the promise of the devil is the illusion of eternal pleasure.

Interestingly enough, although the scandal at the root of Felman's discussions is the scandal of the speaking body, nowhere in the book is there any discussion of body. We are given intricate and extraordinarily clearly delineated analyses of Don Juan and of Austin's theory of the performative. We are given access to Lacan's theories and to the staging ground of the philosophical dispute between Émile Benveniste and Austin, which centers around the key problem of le sui référentiel, which can be specifically stated as follows: can the performative be truly self-referential, or is that an inherent contradiction? Felman demonstrates the logical extension of Lacan's understanding/misunderstanding and brings us to the threshold of a startling deduction, which, curiously enough, she does not make.

Austin does state through parable and anecdote that the inherent but necessary contradiction is that the performative is self-referential. His constant repetition of inherent but necessary as a curious and constant quality of certain statements is a revolutionary new linguistic assertion. This leads us directly to Austin's discussions of intentionality. It is never stated by Felman what role intentionality has in Don Juan's actions. Don Juan stands before Molière's audience as the paradoxically inconstant and auto-referential one. We might say that, at best, Don Juan relates only to a set of linguistic coordinates, at worst, to an abstract 'set' of philosophical principles. The tensions occur in the drama because Don Juan is aware of the organic limit to his activity: death. The audience takes delight in watching Don Juan run between the limits he has imposed through his successive promises. The audience experiences humour in knowledge. Only the characters constructed by Molière are fooled, and perhaps, of course, their corporeal counterparts.

Don Juan is attempting to subvert his own death by changing the theatre of the essential promise, the organic promise of existence, from its main theatre to the sub-theatre of its mode of expression. He plays in a
constant foreground of one and two, refusing to entertain the *enchaînement* leading to birth/death. Hence, success in 'love' is a simultaneous failure in 'life.' He dies in love. He can live only in the thwarted and subverted promise of engendering. The completion of his love would be death, and Don Juan can exist only in the metaphorically imposed state between birth and death. He is not human, by an act of will; he is a lapse between the animate and the inanimate. The end of the play poses further complications, which can be stated as the dilemma of unresolved action (promise) which leads to the act of misfire (*L'acte de manquer*). Don Juan knows he cannot succeed because in so doing he will reach his limit. Also, he cannot fulfil the promise of *je-te* (self-other) or he will complete a gesture, resolve a tension, and fulfil something to its limits. His acceptance of the statue's hand was his conscious decision to close the gap, complete the circuit, and thereby experience the moment, not the eternity of the promise fulfilled. He no more believed in his own death than Camus' Meursault believed in his own guilt.

The lapse, or suspension of natural will or anaphoric slippage, was heightened to allow him to come playfully close to his metaphoric end. Unfortunately, linguistic and natural systems do not necessarily coincide and Don Juan experienced his own death agony as a natural consequence of completing the gesture and accepting the subjecthood of the statue. Don Juan became at the moment of his death the object of a teleological utterance which was disarmingly outside his linguistic radar.

Any analysis of Molière's *Don Juan* must necessarily be an analysis of the persona Don Juan whom Molière consciously and unconsciously created. We are once again acting through a linguistic filter. Don Juan may be seen as a prismatic persona, a compilation of necessarily unresolved locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary forces which are expressed in a few very startling performative acts. Felman presents an intricate and engaging analysis of the triple dénouement of *Don Juan*, which hinges on growth up to an arbitrarily imposed limit and the multiplicity of engagement caused by Don Juan's fundamental promise of always being there. At the last minute, with the closing lines of the play, Molière through Sganarelle, subverts the end of Don Juan and opens the centre of the play again. 'La littérature, espace aporétique entre Don Juan et Sganarelle, est un dialogue interminable entre la voix du maître mort et celle du valet sans maître, se répondant au bord de l'abîme, prolongeant encore leur festin de langage: festin de jouissance — et de pierre' (p. 95). The scandal lives on.

In Felman's discussion of etymology as a legitimate tool of linguistic inquiry, the following question arises: is language being used in this book as an ontology of behavior? We are dealing with complex and overlapp-
ping, interlocking linguistic realities. It is not until the end of the chapter 'Le Savoir matériel de la langue' that the full weight of Austin's radical and optimistic theory of the efficacy of language, the ultimate and undeniable corporeal reality of language, is expressed. If we discard the criterion of truth and falseness and with it the idea of judgment and the position of the detached and disengaged observer, and if we accept Austin's demystification of the illusion of a perfect fit between what is experienced and what is said in relation to that experience, then we must take the final step with him and declare that language is reality. I feel this is the only sane position to take. It eliminates dualism and dialectical insistence on warring pairs of conjoining and prefabricated facets or axes of reality. In very simple terms it eliminates the potential for schizophrenia. Felman does a brilliant job of explaining the logical development of Austin's position. It is worth quoting her summary in full:

Cependant, contrairement à la conception traditionnelle du référent, le savoir référentiel de la langue n'est plus conçu ici comme un savoir constatif, cognitif: ni pour la psychanalyse ni pour l'analyse du performatif, la langue n'est pas un constat du réel, un simple reflet du référent ou sa représentation mimétique; bien plutôt, le référent est lui-même produit par la langue comme son propre effet. À la fois l'acte analytique et le performatif sont effets de langage — mais effets de langage référentiels. C'est dire qu'entre langue et référent, il n'y a plus d'opposition simple (mais il n'y a pas non plus d'identité): le langage fait lui-même partie de ce à quoi il se réfère (sans cependant être tout ce à quoi il se réfère). Le savoir référentiel de la langue n'est pas un savoir sur le réel (sur une entité séparée et distincte), mais un savoir qui touche au réel, qui fait acte dans le réel, puisqu'il est lui-même — du moins en partie — ce dont le réel est fait. Le référent n'est plus simplement une substance préexistante, mais un acte, c'est-à-dire un mouvement dynamique de modification du réel. (p. 104)

Seduction is the focus of the second section, 'La Perversion de la promesse: Don Juan et la performance littéraire.' The entire discussion can be reduced to this pithy statement found on page 35: 'Séduire, c'est produire un langage heureux.' Felman always pushes the key concept to the limit, to the extreme enjoyment of a social concept, scandal. She insists that we join the seduction, perhaps as victims, perhaps as observers, perhaps as co-Don Juans: 'Le scandale de la séduction consiste ainsi en une habile et lucide exploitation, par Don Juan, de la structure spéciale du sens et des capacités réflexives du langage' (p. 41). To read Felman or Austin or to contemplate Molière's Don Juan as a troublesome linguistic
fencer demands the wilfull suspension of judgment. All mix tight logic, undeniable assertions lifted playfully out of their lawful contexts, and the open-ended belief in the infinitely arrayed speculative powers of language. The reader becomes an unwilling partner in the desertion of Benveniste's truth categories. Any distinctions between the constative and the performative are impossible to maintain if one is to read Felman with any degree of enjoyment or scrutiny.

There is one error, however, in the second section, 'Théologie et arithmétique,' (pp. 47-9), which I would like to address. Felman is analyzing eight lines from the play, in which Don Juan and Sganarelle are speaking about Don Juan's lack of belief in Heaven. Don Juan says, 'Je crois que deux et deux sont quatre, Sganarelle, et que quatre et quatre sont huit.' Sganarelle: 'La belle croyance ... que voilà! Votre religion, à ce que je vois, est donc l'arithmétique?' (p. 47). Felman runs through six philosophical implications of the above statement, which, although correct from mathematical and philosophical points of view, do not take into account the revelation of Don Juan's character the lines so blatantly express. She could well have followed the line of reasoning I am about to propose, which would have allowed her to substantiate her contention that Don Juan's constant and necessary denial of limits, of fulfilment, and of success is 'un déni de la mort' (p. 53).

The linguistic conception of père-fils-père follows the biological progression. At different stages of one's life one is fils, père, then simultaneously fils and père. (If one is male, obviously!) Don Louis moves from birth (his) to birth (Don Juan's) to death (his), in the expectation that Don Juan will also move from birth to birth to death, and thus subvert the finality or end point of Don Louis' death. Don Louis conceives of time in terms of natural cycles of birth. His reference point is both transcendent and teleological. Don Juan refutes Don Louis' conception of time. Time for him is a series of interlocking cycles which constantly begin but never end. Don Louis grieves for his son who has wilfully subverted the natural cycle of his life. He runs into pain and frustration because Don Juan lives in a linguistic reality which denies fulfilment. In a very real sense, time is altered by Don Juan. By the nature of his refusal to entertain natural progression of birth to death, by his refusal to engage in anything other than narcissistic sexual acts, Don Juan suspends entrance in time. (A two-fold sexual narcissism is in question here. It is one of the main tenants or elements of the donjournesque manipulation of language that the other person, the victim if you will, is forced to contemplate herself in a rhapsodic and Platonic reverie. Her ego is massaged). Charlotte's joy in Don Juan's flattery and promises stems from joy in the glorification of her own image of herself as divinely
perfect but diabolically seduced. ‘... la promesse est symptomatique de la non-coïncidence du désir avec le présent’ (p. 67).

In the opening section of Part Three: 'Le Scandale du performatif,' Felman quickly dissects Austin's radical theory of the substitution of a criterion of satisfaction for a criterion of truth when analyzing the import of linguistic gestures and utterances. This immediately introduces the dimension of jouissance, enjoyment, as distinct from connaissance, awareness or knowledge/understanding. The import of an utterance is now judged in totally self-referential terms of success and failure, happiness and unhappiness of an action. The sentimental components of affective linguistic play are introduced as tough philosophical criteria for evaluation. In short, evaluation has been subverted and psychological examination and enunciation have come to the fore as the new manner or mode of speaking about le corps parlant.

Austin is described as donjuanesque in his qualities of disbeliever, demystifier, theoretician of errors and human illusions, an iconoclast, a shatterer of fetishes. We fall into the French fascination with oubli — a divine forgetfulness, a voluptuous suspension of temporal exactitude, an immersion in an open-ended psychic reality in which death and birth are subverted to allow a reverie of timeless and dimensionless existence. The only criticism I have of Felman's analysis, which is clear and very provocatively accurate, is her faltering on the edge of dialecticism. Austin appears to be using a linguistic wedge against dialecticism as a mode for the analysis and structuring of reality — linguistic or corporeal. His refusal to allow the critically posed opposition between the performative and the constative seems to me to be a basic stand against a dialectical approach which could be used by other philosophers when dealing with his theories. Felman seems to insist on a linear but dialectical model. Each act in conjunction with one other provides limited, circumscribed forward momentum. Felman attributes to Don Juan dialectical movement within a constrained frame of reference which avoids the resolution of the Hegelian dialectical process. Austin is saying that the dialectical use of language is artificial. Language is not being used to provide forward momentum in relationship to an outside (overriding) concept. It is itself an act.

The synthesis for Don Juan is failure, échec. This provides enough forward momentum to allow him to re-enter another thrust of the scandalous promise of sanctity and closure. The gesture of the ego, je, subverted by his shift to a third person pronoun in his discourse, becomes a linguistic thrusting force which overrides the paucity of his physical conduct. Felman seems to have decided that Don Juan is a universal 'linguistic' type. The question easily arises: do all persons who
view language in a self-referential manner exhibit the sexual and social behavior of Don Juan as portrayed by Molière? Is his lateral movement which side-steps movement along the continuum, birth-death, symptomatic of others who view language as a formal and essentially artificial system?

Let us consider a situation in which two people are negotiating a business deal. Each knows the other is using language as a foil, as an artificial mode of structuring a reality which is not present and which the structurer views as possible, desirable, and perhaps even inevitable given the components of the deal. In this situation, we are dealing not with a Don Juan and a carefully seduced victim but with two Don Juans each of whom considers and works to make the other a victim. The causal use of 'make' here has two subjects and two potential objects, each of which are expressed in relation to a third structure or system, that of the formal deal projected and desired. Is the formal deal the same for each negotiator? How is the deal brought about? Certainly not by referring to an outside criterion of truth, but by accommodating to a mutually satisfactory criterion of happiness and success.

Is Austin then moving towards, in an odd way, a humanization of formal concepts of language as a protest against the other analytic philosophers/logical positivists who hold language and the structuring of reality in the construct of truth propositions? Is Austin not more clearly allied with Kurt Gödel than with Bertrand Russell? Has he not opened up the theatre of philosophy and allowed it to entertain, albeit simultaneously, the formal linguistic system and the inconstant social system? Is he not then suggesting that the formal linguistic system itself is inconstant, even as Don Juan himself is inconstant?

The last section of the book, 'Connaissance et jouissance, ou la Performance du philosophe (psychanalyse et performatif),' is Felman's attempt to act on Austin's radical linguistic theories in relation to the theory of the donjuanesque conception of language. She has explicated what Austin said, and now wishes to enter into what he does with what he says. I am speaking here about the French verb faire. 'Que faisait Austin avec ce qu'il disait?' (p. 100). She quickly retraces the major points of her theory, which may be summarized best in her expression of the 'Don Juan effect': 'L'effet Don Juan est, pragmatiquement, celui de la confusion entre sens et référence et, théoriquement, celui de la problématisation, de la subversion de la dichotomie entre auto-réferentialité et réferentialité du langage' (p. 109). She draws a tight parallel between contemporary psychoanalytic theory and Austinian theory: 1) '[l]'énonciation est toujours, irréductiblement, en excès sur son énoncé,' (p. 105), 2) 'Le réel n'est pas le reflet négatif — le contraire symétrique — du spéculaire: il fait
Le Scandale du corps parlant selon Shoshana Felman / 217

nœud avec lui, (p. 110), 3) ‘... le référentiel — analytique ou performatif — ne peut se toucher et se définir qu'à travers la dimension du ratage: à partir de l'acte de manquer' (p. 111). It is on this act of missing or misfiring that Felman concentrates. She uses this critical element in Austinian and Lacanian theory as the axis around which she builds a theory of the scandal of J.L. Austin, which is parallel to, and perhaps she does suggest, identical to, the scandal of Don Juan.

One crucial problem arises very quickly. Felman herself, ironically, discusses this problem in relation to other philosophers’ understanding of and discussion of Austin’s work. There is an enormous gulf or non-congruency between the French language and the English language. These formal systems of structuring thought do indeed reveal fundamentally different ways of perceiving the world, interpreting the world, and relating self to the world. At the Royaumont Conference on Analytic Philosophy in 1958 there was a great deal of frustration and tension generated by constant questions of interpretation. English and French interpretations of the same concepts differed significantly. It was at the Royaumont Conference that Austin presented the ‘Performatif-Constatatif.' When Felman deals with Austin’s papers she seems to have missed their sporting irony. She responds to his humor and conceives of it as ‘malicious’ perhaps or at any rate, related to her conception of Austin psychoanalyzed by Lacan in absentia, through the intermediary of Felman’s analysis of Molière’s Don Juan! There is indeed a great deal of slippage here. She follows a formal analysis of Austin’s formal language as if it were truly revealing of his person. She seems to have misunderstood his formal manipulation of language for the purpose, not of reflecting himself (not sui-référentiel), but of effecting a dialogue among his opponents and philosophical colleagues. If there is a scandal associated with Austin it is a far more brilliant and laconic scandal than the donjuanesque scandal Felman attributes to Austin. Austin’s scandal lies in his manner of lecturing. The form of his delivery forces his opponents to enter into verbal debate with him without uttering a single word themselves! This is a time honored lecturing technique. The role of persona is very much in evidence here. Austin believes not in categories, but in a method of reasoning, a manner of engagement, a style of discourse which naturally leads him to the use of parable instead of axiom.

There are two points on which Felman and Austin part ways. Felman seems to believe in the existence and import of abstract and fundamental categories and in the anthropomorphism of linguistic concepts. When she speaks of L’Histoire des idées' she is personifying the history of ideas and making a theoretical concept capable of being seduced. She makes
an abstract construct the victim of linguistic seduction: ‘... l’histoire des idées – séduite – croit en la “vérité” enseignée par le maître ..., croit donc en la théorie, non comme promesse, mais comme accomplissement, non comme désir, mais comme satisfaction’ (p. 198).

My main criticism of Shoshana Felman’s analysis of J.L. Austin is her use of logical similarity as structural identity. Her reasoning is sound, inventive, and provocative, but she fails to make the distinction between logic and structure which is so critical when one attempts to reason by analogy. She herself falls into the trap, ‘The King of France is Bald’ – in which the enunciation is not descriptive of reality. Her use of examples from Austin’s papers is questionable. She pulls texts out of context and attempts to unify split fragments from papers written and presented years apart to different audiences for different reasons, in order to forge a homogeneous account of Austin’s scandal as a linguistic Don Juan. It is Felman herself who so adroitly attacks the criterion of homogeneity employed by philosophers attempting to deal with Austin’s rather disparate collection of lectures and papers.

Felman’s method of analysis is a production method: she assembles everything and assumes relationships of proximity which may or may not exist. In her attempt to specify and iterate a working theory of linguistic analysis she fails to structure the parts into a unity by taking significant enough jumps in thought. Her careful compilation of Lacan, Freud, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, modern physics, and Benveniste provides the reader with a wealth of material to dissect. It is fascinating reading, but there are many areas where her conclusions are open to dispute. In a sense, she has overstated her case.

The first three sections of the book are tightly and clearly written. The last section is a speculative fantasy based on a tight adherence to logic as an ordering principle. She comes dangerously close to establishing a truth criterion for judging Austin’s work by bringing in the construct The History of Ideas,’ Marx, materialism, and historical significance and interpretation. Instead of using Austin’s theories to justify or elucidate her manner of analyzing Molière’s Don Juan, she did the analysis first and then used the analysis to elucidate the theory which she used in the analysis. She used Austin to parse Molière’s Don Juan and then Don Juan à la Lacan and Freud to parse Austin’s philosophical fragments.

Perhaps the true scandal is Felman’s analysis which is totally sui-référentiel.

Peut-être n’ai-je dit que la séduction qu’ont exercée sur moi certains textes, certaines théories, certaines langues; peut-être n’ai-je fait, à mon tour, dans ce livre, que perpétrer le scandale, qu’articuler ma propre promesse. Peut-être n’ai-je dit ici
que l'insu de mon propre plaisir. ... Que le lecteur, du moins, y trouve le sien — c'est là mon espoir. (pp. 13-14)

With these words, we are given the end with which to begin. I must confess, I was seduced by *Le Scandale du corps parlant* and found it a most provocative and engaging book. The faults do not mar the book as a whole; they stand in relief against a very lucid and careful presentation of Austin's theories. To quote Don Juan himself, 'Vous ne m'êtes point obligée de tout ce que je dis.'

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