Convention and Meaning: Derrida and Austin*

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IN THE Saussurian perspective, meaning is the product of linguistic conventions, the effect of a system of differences. To account for meaning is to set forth the relations of contrast and the possibilities of combination that constitute a language. However, as many have observed, a theory that derives meaning from linguistic conventions does not account for it completely. If one conceives of meaning as the effect of linguistic relations manifested in an utterance, then one must contend with the fact that, as we say, a speaker can mean different things by the same linguistic sequence on different occasions. “Could you move that box?” may be a request, or a question about one’s interlocutor’s strength, or even, as rhetorical question, the resigned indication of an impossibility.

Such examples seem to reinstate a model in which the subject—the consciousness of the speaker—is made the source of meaning: despite the contribution of linguistic structure, the meaning of the utterance varies from case to case; its meaning is what the speaker means by it. Confronted with such a model, the partisan of structural explanation will ask what makes it possible for the speaker to mean these several things by the one utterance. Just as we account for the meaning of sentences by analyzing the linguistic system, so we should account for the meaning of utterances (or as Austin calls it, their illocutionary force) by analyzing another system, the system of speech acts. As the founder of speech act theory, Austin is, in fact, repeating at another level (though less explicitly) the crucial move made by Saussure: to account for signifying events (parole) one attempts to describe the system that makes them possible.

Thus Austin argues, for example, that to mean something by an utterance is not to perform an inner act of meaning that accompanies the utterance. The notion that I may mean different things by “Can you move this box?” seems to urge that we explain meaning by inquiring what the speaker has in mind, as though this were the determining factor, but this is what Austin denies. What makes an utter-

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ance a command or a promise or a request is not the speaker's state of mind at the moment of utterance but conventional rules involving features of the context. If in appropriate circumstances I say "I promise to return this to you," I have made a promise, whatever was running through my mind at the time; and conversely, when earlier in this sentence I wrote the words "I promise to return this to you," I did not succeed in making a promise, even if the thoughts in my mind were similar to those that occurred on an occasion when I did make a promise. Promising is an act governed by certain conventions which the theorist of speech acts attempts to make explicit.

Austin's project is thus an attempt at structural explanation which offers a pertinent critique of logocentric premises, but in his discussion he reintroduces precisely those assumptions that his project puts in question. Derrida outlines this self-deconstructive movement in a section of "Signature événement contexte" in Marges de la philosophie, but John Searle's egregious misunderstanding in his "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida" indicates that it may be important to proceed more slowly than Derrida does, with fuller discussion of Austin's project and Derrida's observations.

Austin begins How to Do Things with Words with the observation that "it was for too long the assumption of philosophers that the business of a 'statement' can only be to 'describe' some state of affairs, or to 'state some fact,' which it must do either truly or falsely."¹ The normal sentence was conceived as a true or false representation of a state of affairs, and numerous sentences which failed to correspond to this model were treated either as unimportant exceptions or as deviant "pseudo-statements." "Yet we, that is, even philosophers, set some limits to the amount of nonsense that we are prepared to admit we talk; so that it was natural to go on to ask, as a second stage, whether many apparent pseudo-statements really set out to be 'statements' at all."

Austin thus proposes to attend to cases previously ignored as marginal and problematic and to treat them not as failed statements but as an independent type. He proposes a distinction between statements, or constative utterances, which describe a state of affairs and are true or false, and another class of utterances which are not true or false and which actually perform the action to which they refer (e.g., "I promise to pay you tomorrow" accomplishes the act of promising). These he calls performatives.

This distinction between performative and constative has proved very fruitful in the analysis of language, but as Austin presses further in his description of the distinctive features of the performative and the various forms it can take, he reaches a surprising conclusion. An
utterance such as “I hereby affirm that the cat is on the mat” seems also to possess the crucial feature of accomplishing the act (of affirming) to which it refers. I affirm X, like I promise X, is neither true nor false but performs the act it denotes. It would thus seem to count as a performative. But another important feature of the performative, Austin has shown, is the possibility of deleting the explicit performative verb. Instead of saying “I promise to pay you tomorrow,” one can in appropriate circumstances perform the act of promising by saying “I will pay you tomorrow”—a statement whose illocutionary force remains performative. Similarly, one can perform the act of affirming or stating while omitting “I hereby affirm that.” “The cat is on the mat” may be seen as a shortened version of “I hereby state that the cat is on the mat” and thus a performative. But, of course, “The cat is on the mat” is the classic example of a constative utterance.

Austin’s analysis provides a splendid instance of the logic of supplementarity at work. Starting from the philosophical hierarchy that makes true or false statements the norm of language and treats other utterances as flawed statements or as extra—supplementary—forms, Austin’s investigation of the qualities of the marginal case leads to a deconstruction and inversion of the hierarchy: the performative is not a flawed constative; rather, the constative is a special case of the performative. The conclusion that a constative is a performative from which one of various performative verbs has been deleted has since been adopted by numerous linguists. John Lyons notes, “It is natural to consider the possibility of deriving all sentences from underlying structures with an optionally deletable main clause containing a first-person subject, a performative verb of saying and optionally an indirect-object expression referring to the addressee.”

This would be a way of extending grammar to account for part of the force of utterances. Instead of saying that speakers can mean different things by the sentence “This chair is broken,” linguists can extend the linguistic system to account for certain variations in meaning. “This chair is broken” can have different meanings because it can be derived from any of several underlying strings—strings which could be expressed as “I warn you that this chair is broken,” “I inform you that this chair is broken,” “I concede to you that this chair is broken,” “I proclaim to you that this chair is broken,” “I complain to you that this chair is broken.”

Austin does not cast his theory in this form and would be skeptical of such attempts to extend grammar. He cites relationships between such pairs as “I warn you that this chair is broken” and “This chair is broken” to show that illocutionary force does not necessarily follow from grammatical structure. Indeed, he proposes a distinction be-
tween locutionary and illocutionary acts. When I say "This chair is broken," I perform the locutionary act of uttering a particular English sentence and the illocutionary act of stating, warning, proclaiming, or complaining. (There is also what Austin calls a perlocutionary act, the act I may accomplish by my performance of the locutionary and illocutionary acts: by arguing I may persuade you, by proclaiming something I may bring you to know it.) The rules of the linguistic system account for the meaning of the locutionary act; the goal of speech act theory is to account for the meaning of the illocutionary act or, as Austin calls it, the illocutionary force of an utterance.

To explain illocutionary force is to set forth the conventions that make it possible to perform various illocutionary acts: what one has to do in order to promise, to warn, to complain, to command. "Besides the uttering of the words of the so-called performative," Austin writes, "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" (How to . . ., p. 14). Austin thus does not treat failure as an external accident that befalls performatives and has no bearing on their nature. The possibility of failure is internal to the performative and a point of departure for investigating it. Something cannot be a performative unless it can go wrong.

This approach may seem unusual, but in fact it accords with the basic axioms of semiotics. "A sign," writes Umberto Eco in A Theory of Semiotics, "is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. . . . Semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth."3 "The bat is on my hat" would not be a signifying sequence if it were not possible to utter it falsely. Similarly, "I now pronounce you man and wife" is not a performative unless it is possible for it to misfire, to be used in inappropriate circumstances and without the effect of performing a marriage.

For the smooth functioning of a performative, Austin says, "(A.1) There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances, and further, (A.2) the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked. (B.1) The procedure must be executed by all participants
both correctly and (B.2) completely” (*How to . . .*, pp. 14–15). As these formulations suggest, to promise is to utter one of the conventional formulae in appropriate circumstances. It would be wrong, Austin argues, to think of the utterance “as (merely) the outward and visible sign, for convenience or other record or for information, of an inward and spiritual act” (*How to . . .*, p. 9). For example, “the act of marrying, like, say, the act of betting, is at least preferably . . . to be described as *saying certain words*, rather than as performing a different, inward and spiritual, action of which these words are merely the outward and audible sign. That this is so can perhaps hardly be *proved*, but it is, I should claim, a fact” (*How to . . .*, p. 13).

Austin refuses to explain meaning in terms of a state of mind and proposes, rather, an analysis of the conventions of discourse. Can such an account be developed? Can Austin proceed without reinstating the notion of meaning as a signifying intention present to consciousness at the moment of utterance and thus treating the meaning of a speech act as ultimately determined by or grounded in a consciousness whose intention is fully present to itself? Derrida’s reading focuses on the way in which this reintroduction occurs. An especially interesting moment in which the argument can be shown to involve such an appeal occurs in the opening pages of *How to Do Things with Words*, as Austin is staking out the ground for his enterprise. After chastizing philosophers for treating as marginal any utterances that are not true or false statements and thus leading us to suppose that he himself will be concerned with such things as fictional utterances which are neither true nor false, Austin proposes an objection to the notion of performative utterance: “Surely the words must be spoken ‘seriously’ and so as to be taken ‘seriously’? This is, though vague, true enough in general—it is an important commonplace in discussing the purport of any utterance whatsover. I must not be joking, for example, nor writing a poem” (*How to . . .*, p. 9).

The rhetorical structure of this passage is itself quite revealing. Although he proposes to exclude the nonserious, Austin offers no characterization of it, presumably because he is particularly anxious at this point to avoid the reference to an inner intention that such description would doubtless involve. Instead his text posits an anonymous objection which introduces “seriously” in quotation marks, as if it were itself not altogether serious. Doubling itself to produce this objection whose key term remains unanchored, the text can then grant the objection as something to be taken for granted.

Once, Austin has already told us, it was customary for philosophers to exclude—unjustifiably—utterances that were not true or false statements. Now his own text makes it appear customary to exclude
utterances that are not serious. We have here, as the remark about the vagueness of the “serious” indicates, not a rigorous move within philosophy but a customary exclusion on which philosophy relies.

This exclusion is repeated in a longer passage which helps to indicate what is at stake. After listing various failures that may prevent the accomplishment of a performative, Austin notes that performatives are subject to certain other kinds of ill which infect all utterances. And these likewise, though again they might be brought into a more general account, we are deliberately at present excluding. I mean, for example, the following: a performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance—a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of the etiolations of language. All this we are excluding from consideration. Our performative utterances, felicitous or not, are to be understood as issued in ordinary circumstances. [How to . . ., pp. 21–22]

As the image of the parasite suggests, we have here a familiar relationship of supplementarity: the nonserious use of language is something extra, added to ordinary language and wholly dependent upon it. It need not be taken into consideration in discussing ordinary language use since it is only a parasite.

John Searle argues in his reply to Derrida that this exclusion is of no importance but purely provisional.

Austin's idea is simply this: if we want to know what it is to make a promise or make a statement we had better not start our investigation with promises made by actors on stage in the course of a play or statements made in a novel by novelists about characters in the novel, because in a fairly obvious way such utterances are not standard cases of promises and statements. . . . Austin correctly saw that it was necessary to hold in abeyance one set of questions, about parasitic discourse, until one has answered a logically prior set of questions about "serious" discourse.4

This may well have been "Austin's idea," but the appropriateness of such an idea is precisely what is in question. "What is at stake," Derrida writes, "is above all the structural impossibility and illegitimacy of such an 'idealization,' even one which is methodological and provisional."5 Indeed, Austin himself, who begins his investigation of performatives by looking at ways in which they can go wrong, contests Searle's notion of simple logical priority: "The project of clarifying all
possible ways and varieties of *not exactly doing things* . . . has to be carried through if we are to understand properly what doing things is" (Austin's italics). To set aside as parasitic certain uses of language in order to base one's theory on other, "ordinary" uses of language is to beg precisely those questions about the essential nature of language that a theory of language ought to answer. Austin objected to such an exclusion by his predecessors: in assuming that the ordinary use of language was to make true or false statements, they excluded precisely those cases that enable him to conclude that statements are a particular case of performative. When Austin then performs a similar exclusion, his own example prompts us to ask whether it is not equally illicit, especially since both he and Searle, by putting "serious" in quotation marks, suggest the dubiousness of the hierarchical opposition serious/nonserious. The fact that Austin's own writing is often highly playful and seductive, or that he does not hesitate to undermine distinctions that he proposes, only emphasizes the inappropriateness of excluding nonserious discourse from consideration.

Searle uses his "Reply to Derrida" not to explore this problem but dogmatically to reaffirm the structure in question. "The existence of the pretended form of the speech act is logically dependent on the possibility of the nonpretended speech act in the same way that any pretended form of behavior is dependent on nonpretended forms of behavior, and in that sense the pretended forms are parasitical on the nonpretended forms."*

In what sense is the pretended dependent upon the nonpretended? Searle gives an example: "There could not, for example, be promises made by actors in a play if there were not the possibility of promises made in real life." We are certainly accustomed to thinking in this way: a promise I make is real; a promise in a play is a fictional imitation of a real promise, an empty iteration of a formula used to make real promises. But in fact one can argue that the relation of dependency works the other way. If it were not possible for a character in a play to make a promise, there could be no promises in real life, for what makes it possible to promise, as Austin tells us, is the existence of a conventional procedure, of formulae one can repeat. For me to be able to make a promise in "real life," there must be iterable procedures or formulae, such as are used on stage.

"Could a performative utterance succeed," Derrida asks or pretends to ask, "if its formulation did not repeat a 'coded' or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, to launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as *conforming* with an iterable model, if it were not thus identifiable in some way as 'citation'?" For the "standard case" of promising to
occur, it must be recognizable as the repetition of a conventional procedure, and the actor's performance on the stage is an excellent model of such repetition. The possibility of "serious" performatives depends upon the possibility of performances, because performatives depend upon the iterability that is most explicitly manifested in performances. Just as Austin reversed his predecessors' hierarchical opposition by showing that constatives were a special case of performatives, so we can reverse Austin's opposition between the serious and the parasitic by showing that his so-called serious performatives are only a special case of performances.

Indeed, this is a principle of considerable breadth. Something can be a signifying sequence only if it is iterable, only if it can be repeated in various serious and nonserious contexts, cited, and parodied. Imitation is not an accident that befalls an original but its condition of possibility. There is such a thing as an original Hemingway style only if it can be cited, imitated, and parodied. For there to be such a style, there must be recognizable features that characterize it and produce its distinctive effects; for features to be recognizable, one must be able to isolate them as elements that could be repeated, and thus the iterability manifested in the inauthentic, the derivative, the imitative, the parodic is what makes possible the authentic or original.

A deconstructive reading of Austin focuses on the way he repeats the move that he identifies and criticizes in others and on the way in which the distinction between the serious and the parasitic, which makes it possible for him to undertake an analysis of speech acts, is undone by the implications of that analysis. Since any serious performative can be reproduced in various ways and is itself a repetition of a conventional procedure, the possibility of repetition is not something external that may afflict the serious performative. On the contrary, Derrida insists, the performative is from the outset structured by this possibility. "This possibility is part of the so-called 'standard case.' It is an essential, internal, and permanent part, and to exclude what Austin himself admits is a constant possibility from one's description is to describe something other than the so-called standard case."

Nevertheless, Austin's exclusion of the parasitic is not simply an error, an error he might have avoided. It is a strategic part of his enterprise. As we saw above, for Austin an utterance can function as a performative and thus have a certain meaning or illocutionary force when there exists a conventional procedure involving "the utterance of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances" and when these specified conditions are actually fulfilled. Illocutionary force is thus held to depend upon context, and the theorist must, in order to account for meaning, specify the necessary features of the
context—the nature of the words, persons, and circumstances required. What happens when one attempts such specification? Marriage is an example Austin cites. When the minister says “I now pronounce you man and wife,” his utterance successfully performs the act of uniting a couple in marriage if the context meets certain conditions. The speaker must be one authorized to perform weddings; the persons he addresses must be a man and a woman who are not married, who have obtained a license to marry, and who have uttered the required phrases in the preceding ceremony. But when one formulates such conditions regarding the words, persons, and circumstances that are necessary for an utterance to have a particular meaning or force, a listener or critic can usually without great difficulty imagine circumstances that fit these conditions but in which the utterance would not have the illocutionary force that is supposed to follow from them. Suppose that the requirements for a marriage ceremony were met but that one of the parties were under hypnosis, or again that the ceremony were impeccable in all respects but had been called a “rehearsal,” or finally, that while the speaker was a minister licensed to perform weddings and the couple had obtained a license, the three of them were on this occasion acting in a play that, coincidentally, included a wedding ceremony.

When anyone proposes an example of a meaningless sentence, listeners can usually imagine a context in which it would in fact have meaning; by placing a frame around it, they can make it signify. This aspect of the functioning of language, the possibility of grafting a sequence onto a context that alters its functioning, is also at work in the case of performatives. For any specification of the circumstances under which an utterance counts as a promise, we can either imagine further details that would make a difference or else place a further frame around the circumstances. (We imagine that the conditions are fulfilled on a stage or in an example.)

In order to arrest or control this process, which threatens the possibility of a successful theory of speech acts, Austin is led to reintroduce the notion, previously rejected, that the meaning of an utterance depends on the presence of a signifying intention in the consciousness of the speaker. First, he sets aside the nonserious—a notion not explicitly defined but which clearly would involve reference to intention: a “serious” speech act is one in which the speaker consciously assents to the act he appears to be performing. Second, he introduces intention as one feature of the circumstances by setting aside speech acts performed unintentionally—“done under duress, or by accident, or owing to this or that variety of mistake, say, or otherwise unintentionally” (How to . . . , p. 21).
However, this reintroduction does not solve the problem; intention cannot serve as the decisive determinant or the ultimate foundation of a theory of speech acts. To see this, one need only consider what would happen if, after apparently completing a marriage ceremony, one of the parties said that he had been joking when he uttered his lines—only pretending, just rehearsing, or acting under duress. Assuming that the others believe his report of his intention, it will not in itself be decisive. What he had in mind at the moment of utterance does not determine what speech act his utterance performed. On the contrary, the question of whether a marriage did indeed take place will depend upon further discussion of the circumstances. If the minister had said that there would be a full dress rehearsal immediately before the real ceremony, or if the groom can sustain his claim that throughout the ceremony the bride’s father was threatening him with a pistol, then one might reach a different conclusion about the illocutionary force of their utterances. What counts is the plausibility of the description of the circumstances: whether the features of the context adduced create a frame that alters the illocutionary force of the utterances.

Thus the possibility of grafting an utterance upon a new context, of repeating a formula in different circumstances, does not discredit the principle that illocutionary force is determined by context rather than by intention. On the contrary, it confirms this principle: in citation, iteration, or framing, it is new contextual features that alter illocutionary force. We are here approaching a general principle of considerable importance. What the indissociability of performative and performance puts in question is not the determination of illocutionary force by context but the possibility of mastering the domain of speech acts by exhaustively specifying the contextual determinants of illocutionary force. A theory of speech acts must in principle be able to specify every feature of context that might affect the success or failure of a given speech act or that might affect what particular speech act an utterance effectively performed. This would require, as Austin recognizes, a mastery of the total context: “The total speech act in the total speech situation is the only actual phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating” (How to . . . , p. 148). But total context is unmasterable, both in principle and in practice. Meaning is context-bound, but context is boundless.12

This is true in two senses. First, any given context is always open to further description. There is no limit in principle to what might be included in a given context, to what might be shown relevant to the interpretation of a particular speech act. This structural openness of context is essential to all disciplines: the scientist discovers that factors previously disregarded are relevant to the behavior of particular ob-
jects; the historian brings new or reinterpreted data to bear on a particular event; the critic relates a particular passage or text to contexts that make it appear in a new light. A striking instance of the possibilities of further specification of context, Derrida notes, is the question of the unconscious. In his *Speech Acts* Searle proposes, as one of the conditions of promising, that “if a purported promise is to be non-defective, the thing promised must be something the hearer wants done, or considers to be in his interest.” An utterance that promised to do what the listener apparently wants but unconsciously dreads might thus cease to be a promise and become instead a threat; conversely, an utterance that seemed a defective promise—a threat to do what the listener claims not to want—may become a well-formed promise, should unconscious desire be specified as part of the total context. This example illustrates very well how meaning is determined by context and for that very reason open to further possibilities.

Context is also unmasterable in a second sense: any attempt to codify context can always be grafted onto the context it sought to describe, yielding a new context which escapes the previous formulation. Attempts to describe limits always make possible a displacement of those limits, so that Wittgenstein’s suggestion that one cannot say “bububu” and mean “if it does not rain I shall go out for a walk” has, paradoxically, made it possible to do just that. Its denial establishes a connection that can be exploited. Adept of speech act theory, interested in excluding nonserious utterances from the corpus they are attempting to master, might admire the principle at work in a sign displayed in certain American airports at the spot where passengers and hand luggage are searched: “All remarks concerning bombs and weapons will be taken seriously.” Designed to master signification by specifying the illocutionary force of certain statements in this context, it attempts to preclude the possibility of saying in jest “I have a bomb in my shoe” by identifying such utterances as serious statements. But this codification fails to arrest the play of meaning, nor is its failure an accident. The structure of language grafts this codification onto the context it attempts to master, and the new context creates new opportunities for obnoxious behavior. “If I were to remark that I had a bomb in my shoe, you would have to take it seriously, wouldn’t you?” is only one of numerous remarks whose force is a function of context but which escape the prior attempt to codify contextual force. A metasign, “All remarks about bombs and weapons, including remarks about remarks about bombs and weapons, will be taken seriously,” would escalate the struggle without arresting it, engendering the possibility of obnoxious remarks about this sign about remarks.

But if this seems a nonserious example, let us consider a more
serious instance. What speech act is more serious than the act of signing a document, a performance whose legal, financial, and political implications may be enormous? Austin cites the act of signature as the equivalent in writing of explicit performative utterances with the form “I hereby . . . ,” and indeed it is in appending a signature that one can in our culture most authoritatively take responsibility for an utterance. By signing a document, one intends its meaning and seriously performs the signifying act it accomplishes.

Derrida concludes “Signature événement contexte” with what he calls an “improbable signature,” the “reproduction” of a “J. Derrida” in script above a printed “J. Derrida,” accompanied by the following “Remark”: “(Remark: the—written—text of this—oral—communication should have been sent to the Association des sociétés de philosophie de langue française before the meeting. That dispatch should thus have been signed. Which I do, and counterfeit, here. Where? There. J.D.).” 15 Is the cursive “J. Derrida” a signature even if it is a citation of the signature appended to the copy of this text sent through the mails? Is it still a signature when the supposed signatory calls it counterfeit? Can one counterfeit one’s own signature? What, in sum, is a signature?

Traditionally, as Austin’s remarks suggest, a signature is supposed to attest to the presence to consciousness of a signifying intention at a particular moment. Whatever my thoughts before or after, there was a moment when I fully intended a particular meaning. The notion of signature thus seems to imply a moment of presence to consciousness which is the origin of subsequent obligations or other effects. But if we ask what enables a signature to function in this way, we find that effects of signature depend on iterability. As Derrida writes, “The condition of possibility of those effects is simultaneously, once again, the condition of their impossibility, of the impossibility of their rigorous purity. In order to function, that is, to be readable, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form; it must be able to be detached from the present and singular intention of its production. It is its sameness which, by corrupting its identity and its singularity, divides its seal.” 16

A proper signature, one that will validate a check or some other document, is one that conforms to a model and can be recognized as a repetition. This iterability, an essential feature of the structure of the signature, introduces as part of its structure an independence from any signifying intention. If the signature on a check corresponds to the model, the check can be cashed whatever my intentions at the moment of signature. So true is this that the empirical presence of the
signatory is not even an essential feature of the signature. It is part of the structure of the signature that it can be produced by a stamp or by a machine. We can, fortunately, cash checks signed by a machine and receive a salary even though the signatory never saw the check nor entertained a specific intention to pay us the sum in question.

It is tempting to think of checks signed by a machine as a perverse exception irrelevant to the fundamental nature of signatures. Logocentric idealization sets aside such cases as accidents, "supplements," or "parasites" in its attempt to preserve a model predicated upon the presence of a full intention to consciousness at the moment of signature. But such cases could not occur if they did not belong to the structure of the phenomenon in question, and far from being a perverse exception, the check signed by machine is a logical and explicit example of the fundamental iterability of signatures. The requirement that a signature be recognizable as a repetition introduces the possibility of a machine as part of the structure of the signature at the same time as it eliminates the need for any particular intention at the point of signature.

Signatures thus ought to be included in what Derrida calls "a typology of forms of iteration":

In such a typology the category of intention will not disappear: it will have its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance. Above all, we will then be dealing with different kinds of marks or chains of iterable marks and not with an opposition between citational utterances on the one hand and singular and original event-utterances on the other. The first consequence of this will be the following: given that structure of iteration, the intention animating the utterance will never be through and through present to itself and to its content. The iteration structuring it introduces into it \( a \ priori \) an essential dehiscence and cleft [brisure].\(^\text{17}\)

It is not a matter of denying that signatories have intentions but of situating those intentions. One way of doing this would be to take the unconscious, as Vincent Descombes has argued, "not as a phenomenon of the will but as a phenomenon of enunciation."\(^\text{18}\) The thesis of the unconscious "makes sense only in relation to the subject of enunciation: he does not know what he says."\(^\text{19}\) The unconscious is the excess of what one says over what one knows, or of what one says over what one wants to say. Either the speaker's intention is whatever content is present to consciousness at the moment of utterance, in which case it is variable and incomplete, unable to account for the illocutionary force of utterances, or else it is comprehensive and divided—
conscious and unconscious—a structural intentionality which is never anywhere present and which includes implications that never, as we say, entered my mind. This latter notion of intention, marked by what Derrida calls an essential cleft or division, is indeed quite common. When questioned about the implications of an utterance, I may quite routinely include in my intention implications that had never occurred to me before I was questioned.

Either way, intention is perhaps best thought of as a product. To the extent one can ever “fully intend” what one’s signature accomplishes, it is because one has read the document and one’s signature as an iterable act, an act with certain consequences on any occasion when it is performed, and thus anticipates further explanations one might give if questioned on any point. Intentions are not a delimited content but open sets of discursive possibilities—what one will say in response to questions about an act.

The example of the signature thus presents us with the same structure we encountered in the case of other speech acts: (1) the dependence of meaning on conventional and contextual factors, but (2) the impossibility of exhausting contextual possibilities so as to specify the limits of illocutionary force, and thus (3) the impossibility of controlling effects of signification or the force of discourse by a theory, whether it appeal to intentions of subjects or to codes and contexts.

The view of meaning to which this leads is not simple: it entails, on the one hand, the contextual, conventional determination of meaning and, on the other hand, the impossibility of ever saturating or limiting context so as to control or rigorously determine the “true” meaning. It is thus possible, and even appropriate, to proclaim the indeterminacy of meaning—though the smug iconoclasm apparent in many such proclamations is irritating. On the other hand, it is necessary and appropriate to continue to interpret texts, classify speech acts, and generally elucidate as far as possible the conditions of signification. Though Austin demonstrates the collapse of his distinction between performative and constative, he does not for that reason abandon his attempt to discriminate various classes of performative. Even though one may have reason to believe, as Derrida says, that “the language of theory always leaves a residue that is neither formalizable nor idealizable in terms of that theory of language,” this is no reason to stop work on theory. In mathematics, for example, Gödel’s demonstration of the incompleteness of metamathematics (the impossibility of constructing a theoretical system within which all true statements of number theory are theorems) does not lead mathematicians to abandon their work. The humanities, however, often seem touched with
the belief that a theory which asserts the ultimate indeterminacy of meaning renders all effort pointless. The fact that such assertions emerge from essays that propose numerous particular determinations of meaning, specific interpretations of passages and texts, should indicate that we are dealing with a double, not a simple, view of meaning: if language always evades its conventions, it also depends on them.

NOTES

7 Shoshana Felman, in a fascinating discussion, casts Austin in the role of a Don Juan who seduces readers and disrupts all norms. She attempts to set aside Austin’s exclusion of nonserious discourse by arguing that when Austin writes “I must not be joking, for example, or writing a poem” (in the example cited above), “cette phrase ne pourrait-elle pas être considérée elle-même comme une dénégation—comme une plaisanterie?” [“Could not this sentence itself be considered as a denial—as a joke?”], Le Scandale du corps parlant: Don Juan avec Austin, ou La seduction en deux langues (Paris, 1980), p. 188. This is a clever suggestion, part of a sustained attempt to attribute to Austin everything she has learned from Derrida—in order then to accuse Derrida of misreading Austin. But to treat the exclusion of jokes as a joke prevents one from explaining the logical economy of Austin’s project, which can admit infelicities and exploit them so profitably only by excluding the fictional and the nonserious. This logic is what is at stake, not Austin’s attitude or his liking for what Felman calls “le fun.” Felman does argue convincingly, however, that by comparison with his successors, who see misfires and infelicities as events to be eliminated by a more rigorous idealization, Austin is a powerful defender of the irreducibility of the negative.
8 Searle, “Reiterating the Differences,” p. 205.
10 Searle accuses Derrida of confusing “no less than three separate and distinct phenomena: iterability, citationality, and parasitism.” “There is a basic difference in that in parasitic discourse the expressions are being used and not mentioned”—a difference Derrida is said not to understand (“Reiterating the Differences,” p. 206). But the distinction between use and mention is precisely one of the hierarchizations that Derrida’s argument contests. The distinction seems clear and important in the classic examples: “Boston is populous” uses the word or expression Boston, while “Boston is disyllabic” does not use the expression but mentions it—mentions the word Boston by using an expression which is a metaname. Here the distinction seems important because it points
to the difference between using a word to talk about a city and talking about a word. But when we turn to other examples of citation the problem becomes more complicated. If I write of a scholar, “Some of my colleagues think his work ‘boring and incompetent’ or ‘pointless,’” what have I done? Have I used the expressions boring and incompetent and pointless as well as mentioned them? If we wish to preserve the distinction between use and mention here, we shall fall back on those notions of seriousness and of intention which Derrida claims are involved. I use the expressions insofar as I seriously intend the meanings of the sign sequences I utter; I mention them when I reiterate some of these signs (within quotation marks, for example) without committing myself to the meaning they convey. Mentioning, for Searle, would thus be parasitic upon use, and the distinction would separate the proper use of language, where I seriously intend the meaning of the signs I use, from a derivative reiteration that only mentions. We thus have a distinction—am I “seriously” applying the expressions boring, incompetent, and pointless or only mentioning them?—between two sorts of iteration, apparently based on intention, and Derrida is quite right to claim that use/mention is ultimately a hierarchy of the same sort as serious/nonserious and speech/writing. Each attempts to control language by characterizing distinctive aspects of its iterability as parasitic, derivative. A deconstructive reading would demonstrate that the hierarchy should be inverted and that use is but a special case of mentioning.

The distinction is still useful: among other things it helps us to describe how language subverts it. However much I may wish only to mention to a friend what others say about him, I effectively use these expressions, giving them meaning and force in my discourse. And no matter how wholeheartedly I may wish to “use” certain expressions, I find myself mentioning them: “I love you” is always something of a quotation, as many lovers have attested.

12 For discussion of this perspective, see Stanley Fish, Is There a Text in This Class? (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), pp. 268–92 and 305–321; and esp. Susan Horton, Interpreting Interpreting: Interpreting Dickens’ “Dombey” (Baltimore, 1979). In an excellent analysis of how interpretations are produced and justified, Horton argues that “each situation permits of innumerable acts of contextualizing” (p. 128) and that “what is responsible for those apparently infinite and infinitely variable interpretations of our texts, including Dombey and Son, is that everything else in that hermeneutical circle and not just the reader is in motion at the same time” (p. 17). Horton helped me to see that “interpretive conventions,” on which Fish and I had tended to focus, should be seen as part of this boundless context. For another argument that breaks down the distinction between convention and context—but then draws the wrong conclusions—see Jay Schleusener, “Convention and the Context of Reading,” Critical Inquiry, 6, No. 4 (Summer 1980), 669–80.
19 Descombes, p. 15.
20 Derrida, Limited Inc, p. 41; “Limited Inc a b c . . . ,” p. 209. The first part of this sentence is missing from the French text of Limited Inc. A line of typescript has apparently been omitted from line 35 of p. 41 following “toujours.”