

O DESLOCAMENTO DO CONCEITO DERRIDIANO DO
'PERFORMATIVO': DA ITERABILIDADE DA *ESCRITA*
À SINGULARIDADE DA *JUSTIÇA*

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THE DISPLACEMENT IN DERRIDA'S CONCEPT
OF THE "PERFORMATIVE": FROM THE ITERABILITY OF
WRITING TO THE SINGULARITY OF *JUSTICE*

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Abstract: This paper retraces two crucial displacements in the history of the notion of the “performative” in Derrida’s thought, and the effects of this notion in his attempt to rethink the contours of ethical and political action, and of the “subject” of this action. First, Judith Butler’s distinctive appropriation of the notion of “iterability” employed by Derrida to describe the performative force of writing, and of language in general. And second, Derrida’s own remodulation of the notion of the “performative”, in his late reflections on the aporetic structure of “decision” through which he attempts to reflect on the breach between “justice” and “normativity”. Through an examination of the differences at stake in these two possible trajectories for thinking the “performativity” of language and selfhood the paper tries to show, first, the connection between Derrida’s early analysis of “writing” and his late reflections on the gap between “justice” and normativity; and second, it attempts in a rather preliminary way to understand why Derrida, in his attempt to re-think ethical and political action in this way, re-opens a certain “religious” register constitutive of this action, a register, we suggest, connected to the problem of affectivity.

Keywords: writing, iterability, performativity, justice, Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler.

Resumo: O artigo retoma dois deslocamentos cruciais da história da noção de "performativo" no pensamento de Derrida, e os efeitos dessa noção em sua tentativa de repensar os contornos da ação ética e política, e do “sujeito” dessa ação. Em primeiro lugar, a particular apropriação de Judith Butler da noção de “iteratividade” empregada por Derrida para descrever a força performativa da escrita e da linguagem em geral. E, segundo lugar, a remodulação de Derrida da noção de “performativo”, em suas reflexões finais sobre a estrutura aporética da “decisão” através da qual ele tenta refletir sobre a ruptura entre “justiça” e “normatividade”. Por uma análise das diferenças em jogo nessas duas trajetórias possíveis para pensar a “performatividade” da linguagem e da individualidade, o artigo tenta mostrar, primeiro, a ligação entre a análise inicial de Derrida sobre a “escrita” e suas derradeiras reflexões sobre a diferença entre

“justiça” e normatividade e, segundo, ele tenta de forma preliminar entender por que Derrida, em sua tentativa de re-pensar desse modo a ação ética e política, re-abre um certo registro “religioso” constitutivo desta ação, um registro, sugerimos, ligado ao problema da afetividade.

Palavras-chave: escrita, iteratividade, performatividade, justiça, Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler.

Resumen: El presente artículo retoma dos desplazamientos cruciales de la historia de la noción de ‘performativo’ en el pensamiento de Derrida, y los efectos de esa noción en su intento de repensar los contornos de la acción ética y política, y del ‘sujeto’ de esa acción. En primer lugar, la particular apropiación de Judith Butler de la noción de ‘iteratividad’ empleada por Derrida para describir la fuerza performativa de la escritura y del lenguaje en general. Y, en segundo lugar, la remodulación de Derrida de la noción de ‘performativo’ en sus reflexiones finales sobre la estructura aporética de la ‘decisión’ a través de la cual intenta reflexionar sobre la ruptura entre ‘justicia’ y ‘normatividad’. A través de un análisis de las diferencias en juego en esas dos trayectorias posibles para pensar la ‘performatividad’ del lenguaje y de la individualidad, el artículo busca mostrar, primero, la conexión entre el análisis inicial de Derrida sobre la ‘escritura’ y sus últimas reflexiones sobre la diferencia entre ‘justicia’ y normatividad y, segundo, busca de forma preliminar entender la razón por la cual Derrida, en su intento de re-pensar de ese modo la acción ética y política, re-abre un cierto registro ‘religioso’ constitutivo de esa acción, un registro relacionado con el problema de la afectividad.

Palabras clave: escritura, iteratividad, performatividad, justicia, Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler.

Guiding Question: How does *writing* affect the performance of selfhood? One encounters in Derrida's early texts the insistent idea that *writing* "acts" in a certain way, and that in virtue of this distinctive way of "acting" *writing* exceeds and subverts the traditional semiotic schema for understanding the production of "meaning" in language. In view of this insistence, one is tempted to rush straight into questions such as: What is this *writing*? Who's *writing* is it? How does *it* "act", precisely? What is the relation between the "acting" or performative movement of this *writing* and the "who", the self who enacts this *writing* or, rather, is affected by it? Does this *writing*, as a way of re-thinking the work of language in history and in the world, makes the self, whoever it is, the one who makes *writing* "act" or the one who is affected by the way in which *writing* "acts" (we do not know yet, and most probably it is both, as we shall see), does it make the self perform itself in a distinctive way? How? How does this "how" that inflects this performance of selfhood matter from an ethical, or a political point of view? What does this "how", in case it can be somehow specified, have to do, for example with religion (religious practice, religious belief, religious community, religious feeling), and with a much needed, in the contemporary world, re-assessment of the role of a certain "religiosity" in ethical and political action (that Derrida in his later texts will propose to re-think in terms of the figures of the "khora" and the "messianic")?

But before rushing too hastily into these questions, one is cautioned by Derrida himself who, also insistently, indicates that no one can "know" what is this *writing*, or properly understand what does *it* mean (for structural reasons that we will try to examine later

in more detail, but that can be summarized in the recognition that this *writing* “acts”, precisely, in excess of knowledge and of meaning). And that no one can know what is this *writing's* distinctive way of “acting” (and thus one has, as I have done so far, to resort to the suspensive indeterminacy of the italics and the quotation marks to qualify in a cautionary way the terms “writing” and “acting”). Even so, we do at least know that this *writing* is not what we commonly understand by this name. We know that by “*writing*” Derrida does not mean just one modality of language or linguistic communication in contrast to others (say orality, or speech, or gesture), but rather a conception of the functioning of language and the production of meaning, *in general*. Thus, whatever *it* is that the term *writing* indicates in Derrida's philosophy, *it* is thought as performing itself indistinctly in the historical contingency of being thrown into a language, and a history; thus, “writing” works, or happens, in written as well as in oral forms of discourse, performing itself in them by at once making them possible and also exceeding, and in this excess somehow subverting the horizon of meaning and intelligibility they produce. And, even more, as Derrida's texts such as *De la Grammatologie* (1968) or *Signature, Événement, Context* (1972) often make explicit, with the category of “*writing*” Derrida wants to think not only the general functioning of language or the processes of linguistic signification, or linguistic exchange, but also the configuration of “experience” as such, including the curvature of its ethico-political dimensions. In the 1972 text *Signature, Event, Context*, Derrida explicitly refers to this generalization of the structure of the written “sign” to the analysis of the structure of “experience” in general, in the following terms:

(...) I would like to demonstrate that the traits that can be recognized in the classical, narrowly defined concept of writing, are generalizable. They are valid not only for all orders of ‘signs’ and for all languages in general but moreover, beyond semio-linguistic communication, for the entire field of what philosophy would call experience, even the experience of being (...)(1988, p. 10)¹

¹ Followed by the page number of the English translation; occasionally the translation is slightly modified in which cases we provide also the page number of

Whatever it is that Derrida calls *writing* is, hence, a little enigmatic. It is “something” (and again one has to resort to the cautionary quotation marks, because this *writing* does never appear or show itself as such, as a recognizable “thing”, “object” or “phenomenon” identifiable by a finite set of characteristics or properties, Derrida also insists on this), it is “something” that, first, characterizes or specifies the constitution of the written “sign” or “mark”, the inscription or typing of words in a piece of paper or any other material, and how they act in the world, and in history. Second, it is “something” that, once *it* has been identified or specified, *must* be thought not only as the defining character of how the written marks act in the world, but also as the way if understanding how language in general acts in the world, in all processes of linguistic exchange and signification; and third, even more generally, it is “something” that *must* be thought as the defining and constitutive character of every instance of “experience”. This implicit “must” that calls for the re-thinking of “experience” in this way, in the way hinted at by the concept of *writing* as Derrida employs it, is certainly also enigmatic. Any “must” is meant to call for or effect a certain modification in the self that it is addressed to, it calls for a certain kind of “acting” or “performative” attitude or practice from the self (in this particular case, it requires a specific practice of thinking, that the self thinks of its “experience” in a certain way). Hence, any “must” is supposed to call for and effect a modification in the way the self performs itself. And yet, and this is enigmatic, this implicit “must” calls for a modification in the self that would consist in thinking that which has always already modified the self, modified its “experience”, its way of being, its way of performing itself, its being thrown in a history and a language. One “must” generalize the structure of *writing* in order to think “experience” in general, an “experience” that in the expanse of its generality encompasses, *de facto*, the self’s –myself or any other self’s ethical and political compartments in relation to one *an* other, or a community of others. If *writing*,

the original French version published in *Marges de la Philosophie*, Edition Minuit 1972, pgs. 1-21.

whatever *it* is, affects or modifies “experience” in general, it has always done so and will always do so. What difference does it make then, whether the self modifies its comportment, or not, by attending to the “must” implied in the “one *must* generalize the characteristics of *writing* in order to think experience in general”? What difference does it make if the self thinks of *writing* in this way or not, if, on the other hand, *writing* has always already affected and inflected, and will always affect and inflect, the self’s “experience” in a specific way, no matter what? In a certain way that, furthermore, cannot itself be modified insofar as it is constitutive of the very character of this “experience”? What ethical or political import can a “*must*” have if the way in which *writing* modifies or affects the self’s historical, social, phenomenological experience, cannot itself be modified? What sense can such a “must” have, a “must” that cannot, ultimately, change or modify anything? A “must” that, rather, is meant to turn the self’s thinking precisely towards *that* which cannot itself be modified, but has always already modified, and will always already inescapably modify, the self in a certain way? What difference does this shift in one’s way of thinking make, if not only it cannot change or modify anything except one’s own attentiveness to the *writing* that necessarily modifies and modulates one’s self and one’s experience, if, furthermore, this writing cannot, strictly speaking, be known or even understood?

These are perplexing questions. They require that one thinks and attempts to specify the way in which what Derrida calls *writing*, as a way of describing how language acts in the world, in history, and how it affects, modifies, inflects the self’s “experience”, the self’s way of performing itself. They require that one raises and mobilizes once again the questions which were a bit too hastily raised at the outset, while being attentive to Derrida’s cautionary indications concerning these questions: What is this *writing*? Who’s *writing* is it? How does *it* “act”, precisely? What is the relation between the “acting” or performative movement of this *writing* and the “who”, the self who’s “experience” is inescapably affected by it? Affected *how*? How does this “how” that inflects this performance of selfhood matter from an ethical, or a political point of view?

We know quite well that it is the insistence on this “*acting*”

of *writing* what prompts Derrida in the 1972 text entitled “*Signature, Event, Context*” to engage with Austin’s theory of “speech acts”, and its central distinction between “constative” versus “performative” utterance. Derrida thought that his own description of “*writing*” and Austin’s theory converged in a similar impulse: The impulse of identifying and emphasizing a “performative” function of language that remained concealed and neglected in traditional semiotic accounts of how language produces and communicates “meaning”. This affinity is underscored even more insofar as for Derrida, as well as for Austin, the semiotic theory of meaning that is put into question by the “acting” of *writing*, in Derrida’s case, and by the “performative” utterance, in Austin’s case, is a theory that privileges the *referential* relation between the linguistic “sign” and the “object”, between the signifier and the signified, as the exclusive medium in which “meaning” is constituted. Thus, the performative dimension of “*writing*” that Derrida wants to emphasize is one in which the “acting” or “performative” force of *writing* (of language thought and understood in terms of writing), is such that it undermines and destroys the referential relation between the “sign” and the “object”; the Austinian performative utterance is, likewise, one in which language “acts” independently of its referential function, of its saying something about something. We know also that Derrida’s critical appropriation of Austin’s theory of the “performative” aspect of language, has had a very complex history, one that has influenced in important ways the humanities and the social sciences in the last three decades, in general, and more specifically, one that has influenced, for example, the theory of ritual practices in the field of religious studies. In view of the questions raised above, in this paper I want to examine two moments of this history, and what might be at stake in the *difference* between them. First, the displacement that the category of the “performative” undergoes in Derrida’s own work from the conceptualization of the structure of “*writing*” in terms of “iterability” in this 1972 text (“*Signature, Event, Context*”), to the articulation of a conception of “justice” as the *performative excess* of the singular moment of decision in the 1993 text *Force of law*. To put it simply: how is Derrida’s category of the “performative” modified, or not, in this displacement? And the second moment in

the history of this notion that we want to consider, is Judith Butler's appropriation of it in her conceptualization of the way in which social normativity constitutes the embodied and gendered subject. A comparative examination of these two moments, hopefully, will allow us to appreciate that what is at stake between them is, perhaps, the *difference* between two ways of conceiving the ethical and political inflexions of the *performance of selfhood*. The difference between two ways of conceiving the relation between the "performative" function of what Derrida calls *writing*, as a way of thinking the performativity of language in general, and the ethical and political orientation or modality of the performance of selfhood. What is perhaps most interesting in the comparative examination of these two moments in the history of the notion of the "performative", is the following: Butler is one of the thinkers that has articulated in the most rigorous and sophisticated way a theory of "subjectivity", or better still, a theory of the process of constitution of the self's identity and the political dimension and stakes of this processes, starting from an appropriation of certain crucial concepts in Derrida's thought, particularly the Derridian concept of "iterability" which Butler retranslates (in a nuanced and complex way) into her own concept of "performativity". But, as we shall argue throughout this paper, Derrida himself develops and articulates in the trajectory of his own thought *another* way of thinking the configuration and performance of selfhood starting from the conceptual structures which he had worked out in his characterization of the "performative" movement or function of "*writing*". We want to point out to the important *difference* between these two trajectories that Derrida's analysis of the "performative" force of *writing* has taken in the conceptualization of the ethico-political stakes in the configuration of selfhood (in our becoming a certain kind of self), in order to raise and very preliminarily approach the question of how can the category of the "performative" be then rethought in relation to the question of "religion", starting from the conceptual constellations that Derrida himself proposes in his later texts to think "religion": *khora* and the *messianic*. Constellations that delineate, I will argue, the specific modality of the ethico-political performance of selfhood already found in the earliest meditations on *writing*.

Interrogating Butler's appropriation of Derrida's concept of "iterability": Do the *iteration of the norm* and *subjective intentionality* exclude or rather reinforce each other? Let us start, then, by examining some key passages in Derrida's account of the *performance of writing* in 1972. In this first passage Derrida affirms that the distinctive way in which writing "acts" must be first of all understood in terms of how this "acting" is constitutively detached from subjective intentionality:

for a writing to be a writing it must continue to 'act' and to be readable even when what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written (...) be it because of a temporary absence, because he is dead or, *more generally*, because he has not employed his absolutely actual and present intention or attention, the plenitude of his desire to say what he means (...) (1988, p. 8, my emphasis)

This detachment from the signifying intention of the subject that characterizes the distinctive *performance of writing* constitutes what Derrida calls the "iterability" of the written mark. Writing "acts" or performs itself in the absence of intentionality, and precisely in virtue of this absence the written sign can be iterated and reproduced in innumerable other contexts apart from the one of its "original" production, contexts in which, furthermore, it even becomes indifferent whether the "original" sender and addressee are alive or dead. In fact, the very unity of this "one" moment of production is what is, precisely, called into question. The singular event of the written mark's production is, Derrida emphasizes once and again, broken, split apart, dissociated (and he thus employs verbs such as *scinder*, *diviser*, *dissocier* to describe this) by the "iterability" that characterizes and defines the way in which writing "acts" (1988, pp. 17-20). We know well that, against Austin, Derrida attempts to argue that this "iterability" constitutive of *writing's performance* is also constitutive of the very structure of "speech acts" or "performative utterances". Hence, the singular event of the production of the spoken utterance has to be thought as inflected by the same brokenness, dissociated-ness and fissured-ness as the event of the "original" production of the mark. Thus, Derrida expands to the performative utterance the dissociation and fracture

which are also constitutive of the moment of production of the written mark, and in virtue of which the “unity” and “identity” of this moment are severely called into question: “a performative utterance [would not] be possible if a citational doubling [i.e., “iteration”] did not come to split and dissociate from itself the pure singularity of the event” (1988, p. 17)².

We also know well that it is precisely this Derridian displacement in the conception of the “performative” function of language effected by the prominence given to the structure of “iterability”, what Judith Butler regards as crucial in her appropriation of Derrida’s analysis of the *performance of writing*. Thus, at the very outset of *Bodies that Matter*, Butler clarifies that one of the main theoretical points at the core of her attempt to reformulate the way in which the materiality of sexed bodies is produced by the power of social normativity, is Derrida’s displacement of Austin’s category of the “performative”, a displacement that she, in her turn, translates and reformulates in a way that raises a series of questions:

[At stake in such a reformulation of the materiality of bodies will be] the understanding of performativity not as the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather, as the reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains (1993, p. 2)

It is important to note here how the argument advanced by Derrida in his discussion with Austin’s theory of “speech acts”, is significantly modified in Butler’s interpretation. *First*, Butler retranslates the contrast between Austin’s and Derrida’s accounts of

² Here’s another passage in which this dissociation or brokenness of subjective intentionality is linked to the concept of “corruption” which, resonating also with the concept of “contamination” has been central to Derrida’s thinking since his early readings of Husserl: “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 / stamp [sceau]*” (DERRIDA, 1988, p. 20/392). For a very clear and clarifying exposition of the central role that this concept of “contamination” plays in Derrida’s reading of Husserl see Marrati’s, 2004.

the “performative” aspect of language, as one between a performance of language enacted by a subject or a self that, in its turn, produces certain effects (as in Austin’s famous examples of the “yes, I do” in a marriage ceremony), on the one hand; and, on the other hand, a performance of language in which it is no longer the self the one who enacts language, or makes language do things, but rather a “performativity” in which language, itself selfless and impersonal, enacts the mechanisms of social normativity producing certain effects. Among these effects, Butler argues, it produces and fixes the very identity of the self herself, a “produced” identity that Butler locates in the sexed materiality of the body. Even if, as Butler also repeatedly insists, this “production” or “constitution” is never exhausted, never complete, and hence in the fissure of this incompleteness the body can displace and resist the power of the norm (in the performative iteration of it), even so this displacement and resistance are thought as the reconfiguration and redefinition of the self’s “identity”. To put it succinctly, let us say that the quotation above indicates that Butler rephrases the contrast between Austin’s and Derrida’s conception of the “performative” dimension of language, as the contrast between a *subjectivity that makes language do things*, as opposed to a *subject-less language that enables social normativity to make embodied subjects*.

The *first* point that should be underscored in relation to Butler’s interpretation of Derrida is this: the *performance of writing* characterized by the structure of “iterability” as Derrida conceptualizes it, *does not* have the function of producing or constituting the self’s “identity”. Rather the contrary, as we have seen: the *performance of writing* breaks apart and dissociates the self’s identity. Derrida describes this brokenness of the self’s “identity”, an “identity” which he locates in the self-presence of intentionality, claiming that iterability introduces into the “intention that animates the utterance” a “cut and a fracture which are essential [*une dehiscence et une brisure qui sont essentielles*]” (1988, p. 18/389). For this reason, Derrida states, “given this structure of iteration the intention animating the utterance will never be through and through present to itself” (1988, p. 18). The interruption of self-presence and self-consciousness amount to a brokenness and a fracture in “subjectivity”, or more precisely, in

subjective intentionality, and this fracture dissociates and breaks apart the self's unity and identity.

This divergence between the "iterability" of *writing* that, according to Derrida, dissociates and breaks apart the self's identity, and the "iterability" of language *qua* discursive practices that, according to Butler, on the contrary tends to constitute and solidify the self's identity (even if this constitution is always necessarily incomplete and hence re-negotiable and re-configurable), is closely related to a second point of perplexity in Butler's reading of Derrida. What is "citable" or "iterable" for Butler is not the "written mark" or the "utterance" but the *social norm*. The social norm, she argues, is 'iterated' by the body and in this process of iteration the very *materiality* of the body, and with it, the self's identity is constituted, configured.

This problematic extrapolation of the structure of "iterability" from the written mark (or the spoken utterance), to the social norm, remains entirely un-accounted for in Butler's text. And yet something has radically changed here in the operation of "iterability": Whereas the iterability constitutive of *writing's performance* dissociates and breaks apart the self's identity, the iterability of the social norm, in Butler's account, tends to produce and constitute this identity. Thus, in her reformulation and translation of Derrida Butler writes that: "This iterability implies that "performance" is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, and ritual reiterated under and through constraint (...)" (1993, p. 95).

Butler, hence, interprets in a peculiar way Derrida's critical displacement of Austin's conception of the "performative", and the structure of "iterability" that is crucial in this displacement. She interprets it as a claim that the "performative" is not a "singular deliberative act" but rather a "reiterative" (and hence ritualized) enactment of the social norm. As if Austin had asserted that the "singular deliberative act" is opposed to, or excludes, the reiterative enactment of the social norm. The paradox is that Austin himself never asserts such an opposition or exclusion. Rather, for Austin both the reiterative enactment of the "conventional" social norm, *and* the intentionality of the subject, coincide in being equally

necessary conditions for a “successful” performative utterance³. When the bride says “yes, I do” she must at once reiterate (ritually) a social norm or convention and, *also*, have and exercise the transparent *intention* of meaning what she says, in order for the utterance’s performance to be *properly* effective. On the other hand, it is precisely this mutual reinforcement between normativity and intentionality, what Derrida’s critique of Austin wants to undermine, challenge and de-stabilize. The iterability characteristic of the *performance of writing*, dissociates and breaks apart the self’s intentionality, and in doing so it *also* fractures the link that ties normativity to intentionality in the success of the “performative” utterance. In this sense, the iterability of the written mark, or of the “utterance”, disrupts and disturbs the iteration of the social “norm”. The contrast between Austin’s and Derrida’s conceptions of the performative function of language, is not, as Butler claims, one between the singular “act” of subjective intentionality that makes language do things, in opposition to the ritualized reiteration of the “norm” by which language (as “social discursive practice”) makes subjects. The contrast is between the iterability of *writing’s performance* that breaks subjective intentionality apart, that fractures irreparably the self’s identity, but in doing so also breaks the power of social normativity over selfhood, on the one hand; and on the other hand, the “success” of the performative utterance that presupposes the mutual reinforcement between normativity and the

³ Thus, in Lecture II of *How to do things with words* Austin defines in the following way one of the necessary conditions for the accomplishment of a successful “performative” utterance, a condition that refers to the *presence* of the appropriate “intention” in the speaker: “where, as often, the conventional procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts and feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of the participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct them selves, and further must actually so conduct themselves subsequently” (Austin, 1962, p. 15). It is clear then, that for Austin the iteration of the conventional norm is not opposed to the spontaneous and “inaugurating” intentionality of the subject, rather both reinforce each other. Hence, the opposition insinuated by Butler as one between the “iterability” of the social norm that produces a certain kind of subject (in Butler’s view, this would be Derrida’s account of the “performative”), and the subjective intentionality that produces certain effects (Butler’s version of Austin’s account of the “performative”) is rather quite misleading.

self's intentionality. The contrast that Derrida draws in his discussion with Austin is not, as Butler suggests, one between a reiteration of the norm that produces or constitutes the self's identity, versus the autonomous and sovereign self that produces effects through language. Both Austin and Derrida would actually think that, far from being mutually exclusive, ritualized normativity and the singular "act" of a transparent intentionality necessarily reinforce and constitute each other. The contrast that Derrida wants to draw is rather between a dissociated and broken self that can never be present to itself, and a transparent self-consciousness assured of its own intentions, and its own identity.

The "performative" excess of justice. Hence, one should rather think Derrida's displacement of Austin's conception of the "performative" function of language, as marking a contrast between two different modalities of the performance of selfhood. Only then, we would argue, can we begin to understand what is at stake in the somewhat perplexing displacement that the category of the "performative" undergoes in the trajectory of Derrida's thought from the "iterability" of writing analyzed in this 1972 text, to the idea of "justice" worked out in the 1993 texts *Force of law* and *Specters of Marx*. In its turn, understanding this displacement seems to be necessary for starting to identify the kind of ethical and political inflexion that Derrida specifies through this complex and somewhat elusive conception of "justice". In order to develop this point let us try, first, to retrace the function that the concept of the "performative" has in Derrida's articulation of an idea of "justice" in 1993.

In *Force of law* Derrida conceptualizes "justice" as, precisely, a peculiar modality of the performance of selfhood, a performance in which the constrain of social normativity is interrupted, put into question, suspended, by a certain affective intensification of selfhood at the singular moment of decision. It is precisely in terms of the difference between a constrain and an excess, that this 1993 text attempts to mark a distinction between the structure of normativity (droit) and the performance of justice. Normativity (droit) is constrained to the application of fixed rules of general validity to a particular case, rules that are both determinate and

positive. By *determinate* we mean that they prescribe or proscribe the performance of specific acts or behaviors, in such a way that the conformity (or lack thereof) between the rule's prescription and the behavior enacted by the self can be un-mistakenly determined and decided upon. And by *positive* we mean that these rules or norms are clearly enunciated and of general accessibility. In contrast to this constrain, Derrida finds it necessary to understand the idea of Justice as an excess that overflows the determinate and positive character of normativity. In one of the several passages in which he formulates this distinction between normativity (*droit*) and *justice*, Derrida, thus, claims:

Every time that something comes to pass or turns out well, every time that we apply a good rule to a particular case, to a correctly subsumed example, according to a determinant judgment, legality [*droit*] perhaps may sometimes find its share, but one can be sure that justice does not (1994, p. 38/244)⁴.

This *excess* that marks the difference between normativity (*droit*) and justice has two interrelated dimensions, one that concerns the structure of language, and one that concerns the structure of selfhood. On the one hand, the excess of *justice* subverts the constative function of language. It is impossible to know with total certainty whether this or that act or behavior is *just* – and hence the constative enunciations “x is just” or “justice is x” become impossible propositions. Hence, there is no norm that prescribes how to be *just*, aside from the insistence of the indeterminate imperative: “*be just*”. In its indeterminacy such an imperative, if effective, would *function*, hence, as the pivot that turns language from its “constative” into its “performative” dimension.

On the other hand, this *excess* of “justice” also delineates a certain configuration of selfhood, a configuration that Derrida describes as an “experience of *aporia*”. The experience of *aporia* is the experience of the excessive character of justice. If the constrain of normativity (*droit*) consists in the determination and iteration of

⁴ Referred with the page number of the French edition and of the English translation, which is occasionally modified.

positive and determinate rules of conduct, the excess that makes justice different from legality (*droit*) is a moment of *suspension* of these rules and these criteria. This “suspension” is the moment of vertigo opened by the question: How to be just or do justice when one does not have any positive and determinate rule for being just, when these rules have all necessarily been suspended in the *excess* that marks the difference between justice and normativity? How to be “just” or do “justice” when one cannot *know how* to be just, and yet the unexplainable insistence of “how” accentuates itself? If one asks, for example, how to be *just* as a husband or a student or a citizen, a series of specific norms and rules of behavior can be enunciated: you should or should not do x, y, z. In the case of the husband: you should contribute to the sustenance of the household, you should not cheat your wife with a lover, etc. In the case of the student: you should pass the exams, you should write a dissertation before the deadline, etc. In the case of the citizen: you should pay your taxes, you should comply with the traffic regulations, you should vote, etc. But the instantiation of these rules and norms of general validity in each specific situation, even if it allows one to conform to normativity (*droit*), to the legally or institutionally adequate, is not enough for the exercise of justice. Justice exceeds normativity (*droit*), and this *excess* implies that in the exercise of justice the general rules and norms of conduct must be suspended, in the sense that they can no longer be the ultimate and definitive criteria. Describing this excess Derrida writes:

This moment of anguishing suspension (...) can only be motivated, can only find its *élan* (an *élan* which, itself, cannot be suspended) in the demand of an excess or a supplement of justice, thus in the experience of an inadequation or an incalculable disproportion (1994, p. 46).

Inadequation and disproportion between what and what? Between normativity (*droit*) and justice. Between normativity [*droit*] (the sphere of calculation, general applicability, determination, mastery) and *Justice* (the register of an incalculable, un-manageable and indeterminate excess), there is an “incalculable disproportion” which marks the distinction between them. The difference between the sphere of calculation and the incalculable is

itself incalculable. In order to appreciate better this distinction between “normativity” (*droit*) and “justice” conceptualized by Derrida in 1993, and the way in which he employs the concept of the “performative” in order to articulate this distinction, it is perhaps useful to introduce here a brief excursus on an earlier account of the distinction between the registers of the “constative” and the “performative” that one encounters already in the 1981 text entitled *Prejugés – Devant la loi*. In this text Derrida articulates, perhaps for the first time, an explicit and sustained philosophical analysis of the “phenomenon” of the law, and attempts to conceptualize its structure. This “phenomenon” which needs to be framed in quotation marks precisely because one of its most distinctive structural traits would be its radical non-phenomenality, a “secrecy” in virtue of which *it* never and under no condition would appear or let itself be known *as such*; and yet, without ever appearing or letting itself be known, this non-phenomenon would be a condition of possibility and in this sense a “law” of the unfolding of the field of phenomenality. What kind of “law” is Derrida attempting to think in these terms? Is it a natural law, a juridical law, a moral law, a social conventional norm, a divine law, all of these or none? Apparently none, for the simple reason that in all these cases the determining adjective requires that one could identify this “law”, that one could determine whether this “law” is *this* one or *that* one; and this procedure of determination would presuppose that one knows *what is* the law that is being discriminated through such an indication. But this procedure of identification, Derrida suggests, is precisely what cannot be accomplished in the case of this peculiar “law” that, in his own words, “*must not and cannot be approached, presented or represented and above all not penetrated*”. *This* or *that* peculiar “law” is, then, a certain “law of the law, the process of a law about which one can never say ‘there it is’, here or there” [*Voilà la loi de la loi, le procès de une loi a sujet de laquelle on ne peut jamais dire ‘la voilà’, ici ou là*”, (1985, p. 122/205)⁵. Hence, in order to mark

⁵ The translation of the passages quoted here are for the most part my own. The reference is followed by the page number of both the French edition and the English translation.

out the constitutive indeterminacy of this “law”, to differentiate it clearly from any *determinate* laws (be they Divine, natural, moral, juridical or conventional), and to indicate however preliminarily its relation with these other determinate phenomena which we commonly designate as laws, Derrida proposes the employment of the notion “the law of the law” (*la loi de la loi*), or the “law of laws”. According to Derrida’s reading, it is this “law of laws” that Kafka’s text *Vor dem Gesetz* is concerned with and it is in this sense that this Kafkian piece is the occasion for articulating a philosophical analysis of the “phenomenon” of the law. The first conceptual elaboration of the structure of this “law of laws” appears in this text before the reading of Kafka’s brief piece in a series of preliminary remarks that Derrida makes in order to situate this reading in the specific context in which the text was originally delivered (the colloquium at Cerissy around the question “How to judge?” in reference to Lyotard’s work). Derrida reflects on the way in which the very formulation of the guiding question of this colloquium (“*How to judge?*”/ “*Comment juger?*”), could be read as being the index of a philosophical situation at the juncture of which he and his interlocutors would find themselves, a situation characterized by the reversal of the hierarchy between the *constative* and the *performative* aspects of the operation of “judgment”. Derrida explains this displacement as a reversal of the traditional relation of subordination between the constative type of question “*What is X?*” and the performative or pragmatic type of question “*How to X?*”. In a philosophical epoch that he loosely refers to as “classic”, the question “*How to judge?*” for example, would have demanded a preliminary clarification regarding the question “*What is to judge?*”. Without knowing what is to “judge”, without having propositionally defined beforehand the “essence” of “judgment”, there would not have been in this “classical” (or, Derrida would also say, “metaphysical”) epoch any possible criteria for raising or dealing with the question “*How to judge?*”. The absence of these criteria would be an insurmountable impediment for even raising this latter question. This situation of thought is governed by what Derrida calls an “ontological prerogative” which, then, consists in a privilege given to the predicative definition of an “essence” over the performative exercise of a “doing”. With respect

to this “ontological prerogative” Derrida further argues:

[An] Ontological prerogative demanding that one says or thinks first of all the being, that one *pronounces* oneself first on the essence, for example of an operation, before asking oneself how to operate. This ontological prerogative – which is perhaps not all of ontology- is pre-judicative in the sense that it implies in itself a pre-judgment / prejudice [*pre-jugé*] according to which the essence of judgment consists of saying the essence (S is P), and can only be accessible, it, the essence of judgment, to a judgment saying ‘S is P’ before all modalization (?). It is in this way a prerogative of the theoretical and the constative, over the performative and the pragmatic, and this pre-judged / prejudiced prerogative predetermines or predestines the very essence of judgment (1985, p. 93, my translation).

This passage says something, then, about the notion of the “performative” that Derrida is operating with in this text; about his view of the trajectory of a specific “theme” or “concept” in western philosophy (the theme of “judgment”); and, perhaps most importantly, about the definition or conceptualization of *any* “theme”, and a certain nonthematic and non-conceptual stratum that is decisive in every conceptual definition. The release of the “performative” from the “constative”, or the reversal of the hierarchy between them, is not the appearance in philosophical reflection of a new level or register of reasoning, nor the discovery of a new function of discourse and language. Derrida points out in this passage that the prerogative of the predicative or constative function of judgment is always already surreptitiously decided by a non-predicative instance anterior to it (an anteriority to which he refers by exploiting the semantic ambivalence of the prefix in the French term *pre-jugé*). This non-predicative instance would be an instituting “act”, the performance of a *decision* that *institutes* the prerogative. This *instituting act* is not itself ruled by the criteria *instituted* through its operation. The decision to subordinate the “performative” (the *how* of a doing) to the primacy of theoretical determination (to the *what* of a predicative definition) is not in itself warranted or ruled by the criteria which it establishes, insofar as it is, itself, a certain performative force or movement released from, and prior to, any theoretical determination. In the reversal of this “classical” hierarchy between the constative and the

performative (a reversal which, Derrida wants to argue, resonates in the very formulation of the guiding question of the Cerissy colloquium, "How to judge?"), what distinguishes this "new" philosophical situation from the "classical" one is not the appearance of something "new", but the explicit acknowledgement of, and attentiveness to, a certain absence of criteria, a certain absence of conceptual definitions, that has always been characteristic of the performative operation of philosophical discourse even in its definition of the privilege of the theoretical over the performative, the *what* over the *how*, a criterion (a whatness) meant to govern over everything else except the *how* of its own instituting act.

What we are interested in here is not the pertinence or accuracy of Derrida's argument in terms of a conception of the history of philosophy, but rather in the way in which Derrida articulates the concept of "performativity", and the connection between it and the notion of the "law of laws". And this connection passes here through what Derrida calls a *double bind*. He argues further that in the recognition of this absence of criteria in the performative force that, at first, institutes positive and determinate constative criteria (i.e., propositionally defined, enunciative and justifiable), the question of judgment presents us with a double and contradictory necessity or demand, a *double bind*:

[The question] 'How to judge?' gives us in this way to hear the impotency, the anguish, the terror or the recoil of her who is turned against herself in front of the un-decidable or the *double bind*: how to judge when one cannot, or should not, or does not have the means for judging? How to judge when one cannot not judge, at the same time that one does not have for this neither the right, or the power, or the means? Or the criteria. (1985, p. 94)

In virtue of this insistence of judgment from which one cannot escape, argues Derrida, even while lacking the solid ground of definite criteria for judging, in virtue of this insistence that, even more, somehow accentuates in the absence of this ground, the question 'How to judge?' would gain priority over the question 'What is to judge?' And this reversal of the "classical" hierarchy between the orders of the theoretical / constative and the

pragmatic/ performative would be the index of an *epoch* of philosophy in which, Derrida claims, “the absence of criteria is the law” (1985, p. 94). In this manner, he sharpens the contours of a strange “law” that would consist in the very absence of positive and determinate laws, an absence that would not excuse one from judging, from judging what is right and what is wrong or what is just and what is not, for instance, but that on the contrary would accentuate the insistence of the need for judgment in the vertigo of this absence of ground, of *positive* and determinate *laws*. Thus, through this excursus into the 1982 text *Prejugés - Devant la loi* we see how Derrida has already attempted to identify there, around the question of the structure of “judgment”, a certain “performative” force which exceeds the linguistic structure of constative or propositional determination of normative concepts (“S is P”; “the good / the just *is* x, y, z”), and in this *excess* it configures the self in a certain way, it affects in a certain way the ethico-political performance of selfhood. How does this excessive “performative” force affect the self’s performance of itself? By making the self experience a “moment of vertigo” (we have seen this expression appear both in the 1982 and the 1993 texts); a “moment of vertigo” that is both inescapable to, constitutive of and, we will come back to that, ultimately insuperable in the ethico-political performance of selfhood associated to questions such as “How to judge?”, “How to be just?”. In *Force of Law* this moment of vertigo is in another passage described by Derrida as the “*urgency and precipitation*” that characterize the irreducibility of the instant of decision, an instant that Derrida here, evoking Bataille’s “inner experience”, refers to as the “night of non-knowledge”. In this “night of non-knowledge” in which the excess of justice performs itself, the figure of what Derrida calls here a “thoughtless and unconscious self” is delineated. In one passage Derrida explicitly associates this figure of selfhood inflected by *opacity* and *dissociation* (in this “moment of vertigo” the self cannot be “present” to itself in the transparency of self-consciousness, and it cannot be identical to itself, “one” with itself), with the “performative” function of language, which he refers once again here back to his discussion with Austin:

If one were to trust in a massive and decisive distinction between

performative and constative – a problem I cannot get involved in here – one would have to attribute this irreducibility of precipitate urgency, this inherent irreducibility of thoughtlessness and unconsciousness [that characterizes the instant of decision], to the performative structure of speech acts and acts in general as acts of justice... (1994, p.58/255-256)

If one were to trust this distinction, but why wouldn't one?

The “weak force” of the non-performative, and the question of ethico-political resistance. Before reflecting on the “if” in the previous quotation, let us first come back to one of our initial guiding questions: what has been displaced in the category of the “performative” from the structure of iterability that in 1972 characterizes *the performance of writing*, to the irreducible singularity of the instant of *decision* that in 1993 characterizes *the performance of justice*? What has been displaced from the indefinite iteration of the “written mark”, to the “urgency and precipitation” of the irreducible instant of decision? If we were to follow Butler’s interpretation of the Derridian structure of “iterability”, as the necessity of moving beyond the performance of the “singular deliberative act”, towards the recognition of the power of normativity through which language makes subjects, then we would have to conclude that there is an irreconcilable tension between the performance of *writing* as conceptualized in 1972, and the performance of *justice* as conceptualized in 1993. Whereas the former dissolves the illusion of the singular intentional “act”, the latter seems to intensify the singularity of selfhood in the suspension of social normativity. Derrida’s analysis of the excessive *performance of justice*, would be then read as an unfortunate relapse from the materiality of the body into the “metaphysical” phantom of a disembodied “will” (in which, as Butler would claim, the social has been “evacuated”). But if, as we have argued, what is at stake in the structure of “iterability” that characterizes *the performance of writing* is, rather, a certain modality of the performance of selfhood characterized by the dissociation and brokenness of the self’s identity, and a radical opacity of the self to itself, then we could identify the continued insistence of this performance of selfhood traversed by brokenness and opacity

(already thought in the analysis of the “iterability” of the written mark in 1972), in the structure of the singular instant of decision that describes the *performance of justice* in 1993.

In this singular moment of “urgency and precipitation”, the decision does not come *from* the self, but rather comes *to* the self from another, from somewhere else. But in this radical passivity, this performance of *justice* is also, Derrida writes, “hyper-active” because it is an intensification of a peculiar modality of the performance of selfhood. With respect to this convergence of hyper-activity and hyper-passivity in the “moment of vertigo” that characterizes the distinctive modality of selfhood associated to the performative movement of justice, Derrida writes, evoking Kierkegaard’s thought on “the instant”:

The instant of decision is a madness, says Kierkegaard. This is particularly true of the instant of the *just* decision that must rend time and defy dialectics. It is a madness; a madness because such decision is both hyper-active and suffered [*suractive et subie*], it preserves something passive, even unconscious, as if the deciding one was free only by letting himself be affected by his own decision and as if it came to him from the other. (1994, p. 58/255)

This radically passive and yet hyper-active brokenness and opacity of the self in the exposure to a certain radical alterity, is connected in the case of Derrida, as the passage above suggests, to a specific modification or inflexion of the structures of “time” and “temporality”. He refers to this by saying that the performative insistence of justice in the moment of decision “rends time”. This fracture or dislocation of time is further developed and conceptualized by Derrida as the distinctive temporal structure of the “to come” that he associates with the idea of the “messianic”. This is, a structure of temporality that breaks the horizon of expectation, anticipation and calculation that we commonly call the “future”. The “to come” [*à venir*] indicates an opening to an *other* whose calling cannot be anticipated, cannot be foreseen, cannot be controlled or regulated. Derrida also refers to the attitude of this opening as an “unconditional hospitality”. But the openness of this hospitality is not something that the self can decide upon, it is not something that she can choose, or not, to do. It is not an “ethical”

choice in the common sense of the term, which tends to posit at the basis and origin of the ethical “decision” or “act” a free-will capable of self-determining and moving itself in one way or another. It is an “ethico-political” *attitude* inseparable from a specific conception of the structure of “temporality” and the structure of “experience”. The dislocation of time, the fact that the structure of temporality and hence the structure of “experience” are inflected in a certain way, entails an also distinctive configuration of selfhood. This raises a serious question, a question that obviously exceeds the scope of this paper, but that one has to continue meditating upon in trying to understand the specificity of the conceptions of the ethical and the political articulated throughout Derrida’s writings. There is an *imperative* (i.e., a prescriptive) dimension in this thought that calls for a distinctive comportment or performance of the self: the “urgency and precipitation” of the instant of decision, the “moment of vertigo” in the night of non-knowledge, the “experience of *aporia*”, all these notions which we have examined attempt to conceptualize a specific performance of selfhood, a specific manner of performing or being oneself. And yet, these notions also articulate a thought of the general and constitutive features of the self’s “experience”, they are attempting to *describe* how is this “experience” constituted, inflected, configured, in the facticity of the being-thrown in a language and a history. Yes, “experience” is a vague and ambiguous term, and although Derrida employs it in *Signature, Event, Context* (as we read above) and elsewhere, he will for the most part be hesitant to employ this term precisely because the features of selfhood (the “urgency and precipitation” of the moment of decision), or of temporality (the messianic “to come”), or of the spatiality or materiality of the world⁶ (*khora* as a kind of “materiality” anterior to the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible, or the material and the ideal), precisely because these features of selfhood, temporality or spatiality that he is attempting to describe cannot be “experienced” in the sense of being objects or phenomena presenting or manifesting themselves

⁶ Let us recall that in *La Différance* (2003a) Derrida defines at some point the movement of *différance*, as the “temporalization of space, or the spatialization of time”.

before the self's consciousness. And yet, they *describe* those constitutive aspects of selfhood, materiality or spatiality that exceed the horizon of "presence" (and of "experience" in the narrow sense as "experience" of what is present and manifests itself). But if the self, time, space and materiality have these necessary constitutive features that the thought of *writing*, the *messianic* or *khora* attempt to describe, how is there an ethico-political imperative (prescription) implied in, and entailed by, this description? This brings us back to the question that we posed at the beginning of this paper, a question that we cannot yet answer, but that we are now, perhaps, in a better and more informed position to raise once again: What sense can a "must" that cannot change or modify anything, have? A "must" that, rather, is meant to turn the self's thinking precisely towards *that* which cannot itself be modified, but has always already modified, and will always already inescapably modify, the self in a certain way?

In any case, the peculiar performance of selfhood inflected by this structure of temporality that Derrida conceptualizes as the messianic "to come" is, hence, neither that of the metaphysical indivisible "will" of an autonomous and sovereign subject, nor that of the body's materiality constituted by the ritualized enactment of social norms. We are thus prompted to rethink the relation between materiality and radical alterity, and this remains also, I believe, an open question (not unrelated to the previous one) whose suggestive reverberations should be mobilized once again⁷. This rethinking of the relation between materiality and alterity must start in Derrida's appropriation of the Platonic *khora*, as well as in his reconfiguration of the category of the "messianic". If there is a gesture in Derrida's thought inflected towards the question of "religion", "*khora*" and the "*messianic*" would be the conceptual constellations of this inflexion. Both of these constellations, an exposition of which we cannot venture here, delineate a distinctive modality of selfhood, of the self's experience, of the relation between the self and itself, that Derrida often characterizes with the category of the *impossible*. But how to think and characterize this unconditional exposure to the

⁷ For suggestive and insightful indications of directions to which the re-mobilization of these questions could lead, see HOLLYWOOD'S, 2002.

advent of the “impossible”, to the advent of an event that subverts and disrupts the present totality of conditions? How to think this configuration of selfhood that consists of the self's being simultaneously affected by a past that was never and could have never been “present” (the figures of the *khora*, or of the “specter”, indicate this impossible historicity), and by an event to come that will never and could never be “present” (the figure of the messianic indicates this impossible eventuality)? We have attempted so far to show how the way in which this “impossible” historicity and this “impossible” eventuality affect the self, is characterized by Derrida as a certain *inflexion and intensification of affectivity*, modulated by the inescapable indeterminacy of all normative concepts (goodness, justice, etc.), a radical opacity of the self to itself, and a certain brokenness and fracture of intentionality. But, how does this figure of selfhood delineate an ethico-political attitude, a distinctive ethico-political performance of selfhood? Does not every “performance” imply, in its very concept, potentiality / power, self-awareness and intentionality? It is in light of these questions that one would have to read a final development that the category of the “performative” undergoes in Derrida's path of thought, a development that is connected to the hesitant “*if*” that inflects the previously quoted passage from *Force of law*: “If one were to trust in a massive and decisive distinction between performative and constative – a problem I cannot get involved in here....”. Why wouldn't one trust it?

In the 2003 text entitled *Voyous*, Derrida states that the exposure to, an affection by, the “impossible” (whatever that is) which constitutes the distinctive ethico-political attitude he attempts to specify, would perhaps finally have to overcome the otherwise useful distinction between the registers of the “constative” and the “performative”:

[...] through the experience that lets itself be affected by that which comes or that which arrives, by the other to come [*l'autre à venir*], some kind of unconditional renunciation to sovereignty would be required *a priori*. Even before the act of a decision. This distinction [between inconditionality and sovereignty] supposes also that one thinks at the same time the unpredictability of an event necessarily without horizon, the singular coming of the other, and consequently, a *weak force* [*une force*

faible]. This vulnerable force, this force without power exposes itself unconditionally to that which comes and which comes to affect it. The coming of this event exceeds the condition of mastery and conventional authority of that which one calls the “performative”. It overflows, hence, also, without denying in it a certain pertinence, the useful distinction between the constative and the performative (2003b, p. 14).

Hence, with the apparition here of this “weak force” associated to the openness towards the *messianic* “to come”, and the dropping out of the distinction between the “constative” and the “performative”, there is an attempt to answer the question that we have been attempting to raise, but in this attempt several other perplexities arise. The question of how can a descriptive account of the constitutive characteristics of selfhood, time, and space, yield a prescriptive imperative? What sense would this imperative make if, strictly speaking, it cannot change anything, but is meant to indicate and describe, rather, the way in which a radical alterity inescapably affects the self?⁸ The re-description of the ethico-political attitude or configuration of selfhood as no longer a simultaneous “hyper-passivity” and “hyper-activity” as it had been characterized in *Force of Law* (as “the moment of vertigo” in the instant of decision), but rather as an absolute and unconditional passivity, leads to the cancellation of the “performative” aspect or dimension of this attitude. In this passage Derrida claims that the reason for overcoming the category of the “performative” in the description of this attitude or configuration of selfhood, has to do with the values of “mastery” and “conventional authority” that this category is

⁸ It is necessary to refer at this point to Ernesto Laclau’s illuminating commentary on Derrida’s “Specters of Marx” – see Chapter 5 of *Emancipations* (2007) entitled “The time is out of joint”. Laclau succinctly explains the way in which the descriptive analysis of the “structure of all experience” (2007, p. 75) in Derrida’s thought entails a prescriptive moment, this is, an ethico-political imperative. Laclau says that he follows Derrida in this move, but that he becomes hesitant at the point in which the purely formal messianic “to come” becomes the idea of a “democracy to come”, an idea that is no longer “purely formal” but is rather necessarily tied to the specific content of the European Enlightenment’s “emancipatory” political project. A political ideal that, Laclau argues, needs to be put into question and overcome. However, I want to ask a question precisely about this point of convergence between the descriptive and the prescriptive, the point at which Laclau says that he is in “full agreement with Derrida”.

usually, and apparently now, inescapably, associated to. But this association is clearly not necessary *at all*, and we have seen how since his critical displacement of Austin's conception of the "performative" aspect of language, Derrida has consistently worked out in several texts a displaced concept of the "performative" which precisely dissociates the "performative" practice of selfhood, from self-mastery and self-consciousness. And it does so by, among other things, disjoining this practice from the mere reiteration of the authority of social conventions or social norms. But what has indeed happened here is that the force of this "performative" exercise of selfhood that Derrida has attempted to specify, is *weakened*. One wonders, then, what prevents this self from being crushed by the power of "sovereignty", the power of normativity, if the *other* that comes to affect it (and must be received unconditionally) is, precisely, the power of sovereign normativity? Cannot the "wholly other" (*tout autre*) be precisely the performative force of the "sovereign" power of normativity? If so, in order to resist this power must not the "performative" practice of selfhood perform itself with a certain force capable of resisting this power? Must not one retain, then, the category of the "performative" to specify and describe the distinctive attitude of a performance of selfhood capable of exercising this resistance, even if one disjoins this "performativity" of selfhood from the figures of self-determination and self-mastery and from the mutual reinforcement between intentionality and normativity, and thus attempts to think *another* modality of the "performative" exercise of selfhood? These perplexities, however, must remain at this point merely formulated.

To sum up. Through an appropriation of some of Derrida's concepts Judith Butler has given as an amazingly provoking and nuanced theory of the performativity of selfhood, which has been connected to the question of "religion" in the theorization and analysis of "ritual practices". But if *khora* and the *messianic* are, as Derrida himself suggests, two angles for rethinking and redirecting the ethical and political implications of "religion", then identifying the way in which these angles or vertices delineate a certain configuration of selfhood and affectivity, could open a different path for conceiving the relation between the category of the "performative" and the question of "religion". Such a path perhaps

would not take us through the cultural analysis of “ritual bodily practices”, nor through the ascending movement of the mystical soul’s prayer. It would seem to go, rather, through the intensified vertigo of a certain “fall”, a certain brokenness, a certain opacity. And, hence, reading Derrida, one keeps falling back into the question: How to think the ethical and political inflexions of this *falling*, the adverbial specificity of its way of “acting” as a distinctive modality of the performance of selfhood? In what way do the oppositions between activity and passivity, reason and passions, intentionality and affectivity, get destabilized in this other way of thinking the performance of selfhood?

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