



# Doing nothing with words or the power of medieval poetry

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(Harvard English Colloquium, October 29, 2015)

This paper is the continuation of a paper I gave last summer at the Université Rennes 2, at a colloquium organized by the groupe phi, which is a group of research in literature. The colloquium was titled “Pouvoir, puissance, force de la littérature: de l’energeia à l’empowerment” and my paper was about “courage” in two medieval poems *Les vers de la mort* by Hélinand de Froidmont and *Les Congés* by Jean Bodel. I was I think the only medievalist there, the majority of the participants being specialists of modern and contemporary literature. Most of my paper though was about these two medieval poems and poets, but I ended with reflexions on Austin and the notions of illocutionary and perlocutionary strength. Tonight, I will do the reverse, starting with the notions of performativity, locution, illocution, and perlocution in Austin’s slim corpus of texts (1 book and about 10 articles), and then moving backward to the Middle Ages, to look at these notions from a different angle.

I will start with a statement: “I am seated.” I hope that you will grant me that this statement is true. I will follow with a question: “How did I sit?” meaning “Do you remember seeing me sitting down, and if that is the case could you tell me how did I sit? Quickly? Slowly? Clumsily? Gracefully? Silently or while talking?” If you don’t remember, it just means that I accomplished the act of sitting in the usual fashion and nothing special happened (I did not seat besides the chair or in an already occupied chair, or anything of this kind). So there is no reason why this act should had been noticed or remembered. But now look [little pantomime of sitting].

What is the difference between my first act of sitting and my second act of sitting? Did I really sit the first time and pretend to sit the second time? Did I just sit the first time and act (or overact) my sitting the second time? Was I just doing something the first time, and performing something the second time? Was it the

same “I” who did the act of sitting the first and the second time? Or was it the first time just me, and the second time a character I created?

“To perform” comes from the Anglo-Norman “par-former” meaning to achieve, accomplish, execute entirely, through and through. It seems to have been used in rather formal contexts: “Que les dites choses soient tenus, gardés et parfournés en chescune citee” [May the aforementioned things be held, kept and performed in each town] (Statutes of Richard II). The verb entered English in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In his 1530 *Esclarcissement de la langue françoise*, Palsgrave gives a series of synonyms: “Quoy qu'il promet, je le veulx *parformer*, or parfournyr, or achever, or acomplyr, or acquitter.” This verb did not make it in modern French, although it may be now in the process of reentering French via the borrowing of the adjective or susbstantive “performatif” adapted from “performative,” which seems to have appeared in the 1920s in the jargon of linguists and philosophers of language. But it is J. L. Austin who, in his first William James Lecture at Harvard in 1955, famously performed the act of naming a whole category of sentences or utterances “performative.”

What are we to call a sentence or an utterance of this type [“I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth / I bet you sixpence / I do take this woman as my wife]? I propose to call it a *performative sentence* or a performative utterance, or, for short, ‘a performative’. [...] The name is derived, of course, from ‘perform’, the usual verb with the noun ‘action’: it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action [...]. (*How to Do*, p. 6-7)

Thus Austin launched a conceptuel vessel that is still afloat today, 60 years later. Actually today, if I continue with the nautical metaphor, the performative is a whole fleet, made of quite disparate embarkations. In her last book, *Touching Feeling* (2003) Eve Sedgwick noted that the idea of the performative was coming from the converging of “two quite different discourses, that of theater on the one hand, and of speech act theory and deconstruction on the other” (p. 7). It is, when one thinks of it, quite strange that the performative would connect thinkers and writers as diverse as Austin, Searle, Derrida, Turner, Butler, Sedgwick, Taylor, etc. What these thinkers may have in common despite their obvious differences is a desire to do something with thoughts, whether it is analyzing, deconstructing, queering, provoking,

questioning, negotiating or simply debating. In short, these thinkers are not contemplative thinkers.

Austin says repeatedly in *How to Do Things with Words* that he is limiting himself to utterances in everyday language and that he is leaving aside the “non serious” uses of language such as jokes, fiction, poetry. In the first lecture, talking about promise, he asks:

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 whatsoever. I must not be joking, for example, nor writing a poem. (p. 9)

Then he quotes in Greek a line of Euripides’s *Hippolytus*, “my tongue swore but my heart did not” to represent the theory of those for whom a serious use of language implies an adequation between the utterance and “an inward and spiritual act.” For Austin, this disjunction between “what I say” and “what I mean” is neither a sound basis for ethics, nor a sound account of how language works. I am not going to comment on the ethical and philosophical sides of this dispute, but on Austin’s use of a fictional character’s utterance to represent the position of some of his adversaries. If I am reciting a poem in which the lyric “I” says “I promise to do X,” I (the person reciting) am not bound to this promise. To put that in the adequate jargon, in such cases, the performative does not work extradiegetically. But then why would a comment of the same lyric “I” on his (failed) performance of a promise deserve to be treated extradiegetically—that is, to be discussed as a serious opinion? This is where a useful distinction between some performatives and others could be made: those that cross the line between intra and extra-diegesis, and those that don’t. I suspect that the former are often of a “meta” nature (comment, reflexion, or opinion), while the latter are of a more immediate nature (promise, bet, or naming). So, in this passage, Austin gives a hint of what fiction could provide to his theory, but he does not follow it.

In his eighth lecture, Austin comes back to non-serious uses of language, this time in relation to the illocutionary:

For example, we may speak of the ‘use of language’ for something, e.g. for joking; and we may use ‘in’ in a way different from the illocutionary ‘in’ as

when we say 'in saying x I was joking' or 'acting a part' or 'writing poetry' ; or again we may speak of 'a poetical use of language' as distinct from 'the use of language in poetry.' These references to 'use of language' have nothing to do with the illocutionary act.

At this point, Austin has blown away the opposition between constative and performative. It is hard to read the end of *How to Do Things with Words* without coming to think that all utterances are performative, including constative ones. Would the exception to this rule be the "non-serious uses of language" because they do not accomplish neither illocutionary nor perlocutionary acts in the real world? I quote again Austin:

The normal conditions of reference may be suspended, or no attempt made at a standard perlocutionary act, no attempt to make you do anything, as Walt Whitman does not seriously incite the eagle of liberty to soar. (p. 104)

So joke, poetry and fiction would be a special territory of language where we can use language to do nothing, or without doing anything. What a relief... It is so tiring to ceaselessly do things with words. But Austin himself prevents us from drawing this serendipitous conclusion by his own use of examples. To explain the distinction between the locutory, the illocutory and the perlocutory he creates this series of variations on a theme:

Act (A) or Locution

He said to me "Shoot her!" meaning by "shoot" shoot and referring by "her" to *her*.

Act (B) or Illocution

He urged (or advised, ordered, etc.) me to shoot her.

Act © or Perlocution

He got me to (or made me, etc.) shoot her. (p. 101-102)

While pretending to mimic ordinary utterances, Austin stages a minimalist absurdist play. Why does he need to do that? Is it just to entertain his (American) audience by displaying British humor? I believe it is more related to his subject than that. What he wants to explain is that a simple utterance like "Shoot her!" performs three different speech acts at once: a locutionary act (the act of saying and meaning something to someone), an illocutionary act (the act of urging, advising or ordering

someone to do something), and a perlocutionary act (depending on the outcome, the act of convincing someone to do something or the act of provoking someone to resist doing something). But these acts cannot be described or explained without a context, a situation, and characters. I claim that they cannot be explained without a process of fictionalization, and this would hold even if Austin had used a more banal example (like “he said to me ‘please, be seated’”), and even if he had not used any example at all. These three acts cannot happen without a fourth one, which shadows them, so to speak, and which I will name “translocutionary.” So “Shoot her!” performs Act D or translocation, in the following fashion: “He made me imagine myself shooting her.” “Trans” means across, to the other side, on the other side, beyond. Beyond the actual and the factual, language ceaselessly reaches out to realms of possibilities and impossibilities. We cannot help performing that outreach all the time on a tiny scale, through micro-elaborations of situations, projections of the self, anticipations and remembrances, desires and regrets, suppositions about the state of mind of others, etc. This is where the two discourses of performativity that Sedgwick views as “quite different” (i.e. speech act theory and theater) merge into the borderline zone of pretence and fantasies.

One of the last papers Austin published is titled “On pretending.” It appeared in 1958. It starts as a discussion about emotions, feelings, and behaviours, and then turns to the issue of pretending, with the following example:

On a festive occasion you are ordered, for a forfeit, to pretend to be a hyena: going down on all fours, you make a few essays at hideous laughter and finally bite my calf, taking with a touch of realism possibly exceeding your hopes, a fair-sized piece right out of it. Beyond question you have gone too far. Try to plead that you were only pretending, and I shall advert forcibly to the state of my calf—not much pretence about that, is there? There are limits, old sport. This sort of thing in these circumstances will not pass as ‘(only) pretending to be a hyena.’ True—but then neither will it pass as *really being* a hyena. (p. 204)

What is the difference between to perform (in its theatrical meaning) and to pretend? I think it is a matter of truthfulness or awareness: when I perform a role, I know it and you know it. When I pretend to be this or that, it can be as obvious as in the example of the hyena or unbeknown to others or even to me. And even an

avowed pretence can be masking a deeper truth, like the real desire to bite into a human calf. This said, in this passage, I suspect that Austin's own pretence is not to be a hyena, or a cannibal, but a new Lewis Carroll.

Now, it is time for me to stop pretending I am a philosopher of language, and to start performing what I am truly apt and trained to do: reading medieval French literature.

Hélinand de Froidmont was born around 1160 near Beauvais in Picardy. He was from a noble family, of Flemish origin. He studied in Beauvais. Traditionally he is said to have become a noted trouvère, who performed in front of Philippe Auguste, before entering the Cistercian cloister of Froidmont, near Beauvais. But this has been recently contested by a scholar named Marie-Geneviève Grossel, on the following basis.<sup>1</sup> No other poem in vernacular than the *Vers de la Mort* has been attributed to Hélinand, and the allusions in original sources to his career as trouvère are, to say the least, skimpy. Grossel suggests that Hélinand may have been a cleric poet, composing in Latin, and not a *trouvère*. In any case, after writing this poem, he did not write anything else in vernacular but he wrote in Latin, and mostly in prose. He died around 1230.

I will now read you the first three stanzas of the *Vers de la mort* (which counts 50 stanzas), in Old French, but with a shamelessly modernized pronunciation.

“Morz:” First word, first syllable, first sound. Does it mean anything to say “Morz”? Does it do anything? Does it achieve anything? Does it perform anything? It does, achieve and perform the act of speech Mallarmé described in the following terms:

Je dis une fleur! et, hors de l'oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour en tant que quelque chose d'autre que les calices sus musicalement se lève, idée même et suave, l'absente de tout bouquet.

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<sup>1</sup> “Hélinand avant Froidmont: A la recherche d'un “trouvère” perdu” in *Sacris Erudiri: A Journal of Late Antiquity and Medieval Christianity*, 52 (2013), p. 319-352.

I say “a flower” and, out of the oblivion where my voice relegates any outline as something other than the calyces known musically arises, an idea in itself and sweet, she who is absent of any bunch.

This means nothing. This does nothing. Sorry, old sport, but that is exactly what death does to us. Calling out death at the onset of an utterance accomplishes a paradoxical translocation: it makes us imagine the presence of our own absence. The death Helinand calls out is not an abstraction: it is his death, the death that he fears so much that he has accepted to die twice in order to escape it. In order not to die forever and in anticipation of his physical death, he has died to the world and its pleasures, in a place that he depicts as a cage for a molting bird, as a hot bath for sweating bodies. Strange metaphors to represent a Cistercian abbey named Froidmont. Helinand calls out death as the defining power of his new life, his new self, his new heart: “Morz qui m’a mis muer en mue” could be translated as “Ma mort c’est moi” or: “Le moi est mort; vive le moi!” The first stanza creates such a strong bond between a you death and a me dead that all others (except for a few wise people, and anyway they lived long time ago) become a “them” deaf, blind, stupid, like a pack of sheep running toward death without recognizing it. And that could be it. I know I will not die forever because I am already dead to the world, while they don’t know they will die forever because they hold onto their miserable life in that miserable world. If we stop here, we can conclude that Hélinand was one of these monastic snobs, who, for their personal salvation, picked the crème de la crème of monasticism: the Cistercian order, and not a place for monks “aux gras cous” [with fat necks] as he sneers later on.

The second stanza breaks that configuration, by sending death off to the world out of which Hélinand has removed himself. “Morz, va!” instead of “Morz, qui...” Dying to the world does not just make one able to avoid eternal death, it empowers one to become a master of death. In this second stanza, Hélinand demonstrates his power over death in two ways: he can order her, and he can charm her, and in both cases it is by poetic devices. This brings us back to the issue of Hélinand trouvère or not, which would be a minor, uninteresting historical question,



if the first recipients of Hélinand's democratic desire to share death with everybody were not "çaus qui d'amors chantent," that is the trouvères, menestrels, or jongleurs of his time. Even Marie-Geneviève Grossel acknowledges that this stanza seems to indicate a special relation between Hélinand and this type of poets and performers. But is it a real relation: "Por voir le puis acreanter" [This I can vouch for] because I was one of them? Or is it a fictional setting by which Hélinand establishes himself as a vernacular poet (which he was not really before), in order to leverage the new poetic mode imported from the south to the north? Singing of love in *roman*, everybody can do that, but singing of death and fear of God in that language, the language of the world that has to be left behind, is not for the faint of heart. It may be impossible to decide what the historical relation between Hélinand and the trouvères was. But it can be said that in this speech act, Hélinand pretends to be the poet which he is not any more and perhaps has never been in order to become the poet he truly is.

To graduate students who prepare for job interviews, sometime I say "during the interview you need to pretend to be who you are." Pretending to be who we are is not something we do naturally, because we tend to pretend to be someone else out of disappointment, irritation or desperation with our own self. There are so many things one could be... and one is not. But there are moments of particular intensity in life, like entering a monastery or going to a job interview, during which one needs to perform at such a level that one cannot help being transformed while doing that. Then pretending to be oneself becomes a real possibility, not just a play on words. When it works, it unleashes energy, the sort of energy that electrifies the third stanza of the *Vers de la mort*. Death is everywhere, moves and shakes everything, and reaches out to everybody, including those who believe they are out of reach because they are wealthy, educated, well connected, and healthy. Hélinand channels the energy he grants to death into one word, which he has not yet used in the poem, "je." "Je veux mes amis saluer / Par toi que tu les espoentes." It is hard for us today to conceive an "I" building itself through such a terrifying act of friendship. And yet, it is hard not to be taken by this "I" suddenly so present to the world Hélinand abandoned (or thought he had abandoned?)

All right. A poetic “I” can say whatever it wants to say: that won’t affect the world because poetic words do nothing. To the best of our knowledge the real historic people (noble men and clerics) to whom Hélinand sent death did not die on the spot. It does not seem either that they all became Cistercian monks. It is impossible to say whether anyone who read *Les Vers de la Mort* “shedded skin or changed old ways” for that matter. However we know that some of the readers or listeners of this poem did something directly inspired by it: they wrote other poems on the same pattern, which seems to have been invented by Hélinand, and is called by French scholars “la strophe hélinandienne.” Jean Bodel is one of these first imitators.

On the other side of the handout, you will find the first three stanzas of *Les Congés* by Jean Bodel. Bodel was born around 1165, lived in the town of Arras, and was a real trouvère, affiliated to the “Confrérie de jongleurs et bourgeois d’Arras.” He composed nine fabliaux, one epic poem (*La Chanson des Saisnes*, the Song of the Saxons), one miracle play (*Le Jeu de saint Nicolas*), five pastourelles, and *Les Congés*, a 45 stanzas long poem. All of his known work is in vernacular verse. In 1202, as he was going to join the fourth Crusade, he contracted leprosy and had to enter a leprosarium near Arras. He died there between October 1209 and February 1210: his death was recorded in the register of the *Confrérie des Jongleurs*.

[reading]

No need to convoke death and send it to your friends. Just look at your body, your matter. What do you see? What do you foresee? What do you feel? “Pitié.” Both distress and pity, what you suffer, what you think other people feel for your suffering and what you feel for other people’s suffering, “pitié” creates a space of intimacy—the intimacy of pain and pleasure. For if Hélinand’s death was sent off to teach people the fear of God, Jean’s pity is kept at hand to teach Jean himself how to rejoice—I was tempted to translate “to have fun”—in his pain: “k’en ce me deduisse.” God has played a bad joke on me, so it is right that I make fun of what’s happening to me—which is not truly funny. The translocation here is not paradoxical, but ironical,

and documents the comi-tragic cohabitation of a sane mind with an insane body. To my knowledge, this is the oldest text in French to present us with a first-person body, an incarnated “I” and an interiorized *écrivain*. Reading *Les Congés* make you feel that you are sharing the experience of writing them. Hélinand’s poem does not produce that effect. Hélinand creates a powerful “I” by unleashing death as sheer energy. Jean does not create an “I”: it is already there. The first stanza implies a pre-existing awareness (“mon sens”): the second stanza, a pre-existing memory (“recor”), and the third stanza, a pre-existing society (“mes liges fiés”). Jean Bodel did not pretend to be who he was, that is a noted poet and citizen of Arras. Everyone in Arras knew him, and that may be why he decided to perform the undoing of his body and social network in a poem that could be circulated to all. He also needed money to enter the leprosarium, and it is clear that *Les Congés* are a fund-raising campaign. It must have been successful since Jean stayed about 8 years in the leprosarium, which means that he found sponsors to support his living there. So *Les Congés* had an illocutory and a perlocutory force in the most simple sense that Austin gives to these terms. They moved people to give money, support, and, one hopes, comfort. I believe that Bodel achieved that performance (in the non-theatrical meaning) through building the whole poem on a speech act, which is not especially poetic or dramatic: the act of asking permission to leave (“demander congé”).

“Demander congé” articulates a posture of submission to a higher authority, which has the right to give or deny the permission to leave, with a gesture of valediction. Jean asks for permission to leave as he says goodbye. The first four lines of the second stanza sets up this articulation, which will be then repeated in the rest of the poem:

Congié demant tout premerain  
 A celui qui plus m’est a main  
 Et dont je miex loer me doi :  
 Jehan Boschet, a Dieu remain !

My leave, I ask first from the one  
 Who is my closest friend  
 And best advisor :

Jehan Boschet, may God keep you !

But his asking for authorization is entirely superfluous, as he declares in the first stanza: “Est drois que je a chascun ruisse / Tel don, que nus ne m’escondie, / Congié...” [It is right that I ask everyone a gift no one can refuse me / My leave...]. Asking permission to leave when one is forced to leave is a form of rebellious submission. “Leave this room!” “May I have your permission to leave this room?” To give an order and to grant a permission are not the same type of performatives. The former is initiated by the giver; the latter is initiated by the receiver. In other words, *Les Congés* gives back agency to someone who is not any more in a position of control over his own life, who knows it, and grudgingly accepts it. “Grudgingly” is important. Jean Bodel does not present himself as a hero or a martyr. He never hides his discontent about the whole thing. He does not claim that leprosy is his great chance to convert to the type of life that grants you—according to some—a secure afterlife. He hopes that will be the case, because if it is not, oh! God, “trop avroie en deus enfers” [two hells! That would be too much!] (st. 6).

The relationship Jean establishes with his friends and patrons through asking them a permission to leave that he does not need to ask is ironical, ambiguous, perhaps ambivalent, but also truly affectionate. It is neither cynical nor resentful as his last words to everybody, in stanza 45, show:

A Dieu vous vueil tous conmander  
Ensamble, sans chacun nommer,  
Car n’i a nul dont je me plaigne

To God I want to commend all of you  
Together, without naming each of you,  
For there is no one I complain about.

His relationship with God is modeled on his human relationship. It is not a passionate love, an intense longing, or a complete surrender. It is a long-standing friendship, recognizing the inequality of the relation (yea I know you are God and I am Jean Bodel), but retaining the right to a *franc parler* until the end—and perhaps after the end. I cannot help imagining the soul of Jean Bodel engaging in the same

type of dialogue with Saint Peter, Saint Paul and God that is found in a fabliau (not attributed to Bodel) titled “The villain who conquered paradise through pleading.” But that would be for another talk.

I am not going to conclude but I am going to stop. As I worked on this presentation, I realized how much more work would be necessary to make a real solid argument out of these nuggets of thoughts coming from an old intimacy with a few texts I truly love. I don’t have the time at this moment to do the work of reading all I would need to read by these three authors (Austin, Hélinand de Froidmont, Jean Bodel), about them and around them, and all I would need to read on speech acts theory and performance studies, to support my intuition that the “non serious” uses of language are the most serious uses of language one can perform. At the same time, I am convinced that the non serious uses of language (jokes, poetry, fiction etc.) are never separated from the serious, banal, everyday uses of language—and vice versa. And I am going to give you one authentic example of that. This is not a fiction. Two or perhaps three years ago, I was visiting my father in the nursing home where he spent the last years of his life. He was in the Alzheimer unit because he had Alzheimer. I was sitting with him and a group of other residents, and, as often, no one was talking and no one was doing anything. Suddenly someone said: “Ben qu’est-ce qu’on fait maintenant?” And someone answered: “On fait pitié.”