

Submitted for the University of Regina's Literary Eclectic III

The Performative Utterance in Jane Eyre

A performative utterance is a special sort of speech act; a performative utterance is not mere speech, but action: “[it] is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it” (Austin, 163). For most people, performative utterances occur quite rarely; the wedding vows, 'I do,' “as uttered in the course of the marriage ceremony” (Austin, 163), are one such instance; the individual who utters ‘I do’ is not merely describing the action that he or she is doing, but is only doing the action by saying that he or she is doing it. In other words, without saying 'I do' in a marriage ceremony, no one *does* marry anyone else. Another example is an individual writing his or her will: “I give and bequeath my watch to my brother” (Austin, 163). Once again, without declaring that one does bequeath something—in this instance, declaring it in writing—nothing is bequeathed. Because performative utterances are both speech and action, they are incredibly powerful speech acts. Throughout Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre the tremendous importance of language is reflected by a continual development towards, and eventually even beyond, the performative utterance. Jane's language enters the novel as a deadly weapon that avenges Jane's oppression, and eventually evolves into a tactical tool that is able to dominate, dissuade, or even destroy, depending on the situation. As Jane learns to master language, language that might otherwise be mere descriptive speech transforms into performative utterance to such a

degree that speech and action repeatedly merge into one. By tracking the elevation of Jane's vocal tenacity, and exploring various conversations throughout Jane Eyre, it becomes clear that speech is more than a way of communicating for Jane; rather, language is indelibly tied to her physical and emotional condition, and ultimately determines how successfully Jane is able to survive. To track the development of, and eventually beyond, the performative utterance in Jane Eyre is to track Jane's personal development, her self-confidence, her independence, and her very ability to survive.

Language and honesty seem to be of intrinsic importance to Jane, but are made all the more important by the unfortunate situation she is made to endure before she can finally gain credibility. Jane is a blood relation to the Reeds, but is not like them: put simply, Jane is honest and they are not. However, the Reeds see the situation as just the opposite, and continually accuse Jane of dishonesty—an accusation that causes a great deal of grief. This is evident when Mrs. Reed warns Mr. Brocklehurst, the schoolmaster who will soon have authority over Jane, about Jane's dishonesty: “guard against her worst fault, a tendency to deceit. I mention this in your hearing, Jane, that you may not attempt to impost on Mr. Brocklehurst” (28). Though Jane simply bares this false accusation while Mr. Brocklehurst is present, when she is once more left alone with Mrs. Reed, Jane violently defends herself in an outburst that functionally severs any ties between herself and Mrs. Reed: “I am not deceitful: if I were, I should say I loved I *you*; but I do declare I do not love you . . . And this book about the liar, you may give it to your girl, Georgiana, for it is she who tells lies, and not I” (30). Though Jane is materially powerless to defend herself against Mrs. Reed's accusations, she is able to deploy her language to deal a wounding blow to Mrs. Reed.

When Jane arrives at Lowood she receives the chance to leave the past behind her and begin anew. Initially, no one questions her honesty or character, and she quickly earns the respect of both her teachers and her fellow students: “I had reached the head of my class; Miss Miller praised me warmly; Miss Temple had smiled approbation . . . and then I was well-received by my fellow pupils” (58). However, when Mr. Brocklehurst publicly denounces Jane as a liar, based on Mrs. Reed’s warning, where he calls her “a castaway . . . [and] a liar!” (56), she faces the threat of once more losing her credibility, and the respect of her peers. In short, when it once more becomes unclear whether or not anyone will be able to respect Jane’s honesty, there is the serious threat that Jane will lose not only a source of power, but her true identity. When Miss Temple offers to look into the situation thoroughly, it is clear how crucial it is to Jane that her language be respected; if her word is judged to be honest and trustworthy, she faces a bright future of academic advancement and general respect. If, however, her words are not respected, then neither will she, and her future is uncertain. It is only when Miss Temple restores Jane’s reputation, declaring she is “most happy to be able to pronounce [Jane] completely cleared from every imputation” (63), that Jane finds herself—for the first time—secure from unjust persecution. Jane can only be truly secure when her words are respected and the truth of her speech is believed.

With this newfound security Jane is able to develop as an individual, and learns to temper her language into a well-formed tool, rather than merely a blindly striking weapon of self-defense. The change of language’s function is first evident once she is working as a governess, in Jane’s encounters with Rochester; during their many conversations, Jane cleverly uses words to play, flirt, manipulate, and even control Rochester. Jane herself

associates her linguistic abilities with both clever flirtation and self-defense: “Soft scene, daring demonstration, I would not have: a weapon of defense must be prepared—I whetted my tongue” (233). The fact that she whets her tongue as a response to the idea that she must prepare her defense reveals that Jane herself still perceives and uses language as a weapon; however, the weapon is not intended to damage Rochester as her childhood outburst was meant to wound Mrs. Reed, but rather to protect both him and herself from falling into potentially dangerous ways. Jane’s language is no longer deployed as a desperate means of self-defense, but is now able to strike preemptively.

The shift in the utility of language Jane gains from childhood to adulthood is most evident when Jane visits Mrs. Reed on her deathbed. When Jane asks Mrs. Reed’s forgiveness, insisting, “Forgive me for my passionate language: I was a child then; eight, nine years have passed since that day” (204), Jane regrets her undisciplined use of language. This recognition shows that Jane has come to appreciate just how damaging her language can be. With the benefit of hindsight, Jane realizes the potency of language as a weapon, and realizes that she ought not to have used such a potent weapon without appropriate discretion. Whether or not Mrs. Reed deserved the verbal lashing is quite another issue—but it is clear that Jane regrets her previously unchecked language.

When Mrs. Reed rejects this attempt to make friends, Jane utters the first performative utterance in *Jane Eyre*: “Love me, then, or hate me, as you will . . . you have my full and free forgiveness” (204). In this instance, Jane is not simply telling Mrs. Reed that she forgave her in the past, nor that she shall forgive her in the future, but rather, the act of saying “you have my full and free forgiveness” (204), itself, makes the statement true. On the one hand, this performative utterance shows how crucial Jane’s language

and honesty have become to her; it is almost as though something is only really true to her when she expresses it. On the other hand, Jane's deployment of this performative utterance shows the degree to which she has mastered language; language is no longer a representation of inner impulses, but tied to them, with the two operating in near symbiosis.

It is clear just how symbiotic Jane's actions and language are when she leaves Rochester. Standing outside of his bedroom door in the middle of the night, Jane reflects, "I had but to go in and say . . . 'Mr. Rochester, I will love you and live with you through life till death,' and a fount of rapture would spring to my lips" (273). Clearly, Jane is acknowledging the indelible connection between word and truth; she realizes that if she would only say that she would stay with him, then she truly would stay with him. But lacking those words, it simply cannot be so; Jane must ultimately leave so that she can keep her word and not live as Rochester's mistress.

When Jane arrives at the village near Whitecross she finds herself back in a world where her word is not believed, and more importantly, where she does not have the ability to speak all that is on her mind; the limit of that which Jane is able to speak, the limit of truth paralyzes Jane's linguistic effectiveness, and she is utterly unable to convince the area's residence that she is not a threat to them: "Almost desperate, I asked for half a cake; she again refused. 'How could she tell where I had got the handkerchief?' she asked" (280). Because Jane's word is not believed, she begins to starve, and eventually comes very close to death. Though right until the end Hannah does not believe Jane and turns her away from the door, St. John accepts Jane, not because of her language, but because of her evident need. While she is still ill Jane reaches a new low and, in

desperation, lies about her name, calling herself “Jane Elliot” (287). This dishonesty represents Jane’s physical and spiritual weakness, showing how bound Jane’s words are to her inner self. The connection between inner health and language is made even more evident by the fact that the first day she rises from bed, Jane admits that the name she supplied them was “not [her] real name” (297), though she still cannot tell them her true name. Clearly, Jane’s honesty is tied to her health—physical, psychological, and spiritual—and ultimately her language reflects her inner state.

It is only when Jane proves to be, in reality, as close to death as she had told Hannah she was, that Jane achieves any degree of credibility, earns the ability to prove her honesty, and begins to regain her powerful language. Because Jane’s honesty on this matter is evident by the time she first rises from bed, she uses the occasion to defend herself against Hannah’s assertions that she was not what she claimed (291-2). When Hannah admits her err, Jane enacts another performative utterance of forgiveness: “That will do—I forgive you now. Shake hands” (292). Once more, Jane must utter that she forgives Hannah for it to be true. However, because Hannah does not yet trust her word fully, and because Jane is still in the process of healing, it is necessary to accompany the performative utterance of forgiveness with the physical act of hand shaking. From this point on, Jane’s honesty, the power of her language, as well as her relationships with St. John, his sisters, and Hannah, all begin to flourish.

Because Jane’s words are so tied to her well-being, St. John presents a potential crisis when he neutralizes the potency of Jane’s language by twisting her words to his own ends. Though Jane responds to his request for marriage with a very powerful conditional, only accepting one aspect of his proposal and saying, “I freely consent to go

with you as your fellow-missionary; but not as your wife; I cannot marry you and become part of you” (347), St. John hears only what he wants to hear and acts as though she has just accepted unconditionally. When she restates her actual position, he responds by twisting her words again: “you still may be spared the dishonor of breaking your promise, and deserting the band you engaged to join” (352). Jane recognizes that St. John is manipulating her, and even states, “Now I never had, as the reader knows, either given any formal promise, or entered into any engagement; and this language was all much too hard, and much too despotic for the occasion” (352). However, this statement also shows that Jane is nearly overcome by St. John’s argument, not because he has many good argumentative points, but because he removes her ability to defend herself by limiting the effectiveness of her words. Jane is so utterly dependant on her language that St. John is nearly able to bend Jane to his will simply by neglecting and disregarding her words.

The reason for St. John’s near manipulative success, however, may not be quite so simple. As was stated earlier, there seems to be a connection between Jane’s physical and mental health, and the potency of her language. The fact that Jane is easily able to dominate St. John when she hears the apparition of Rochester, suggests that her repressed longing for Rochester had limited the potency of Jane’s words. It is clear from Jane’s description of her oral victory over St. John that Jane, once more, sees language as a carefully calibrated tool, and precise weapon:

It was *my* time to assume ascendancy. *My* powers were in play, and in force. I told him to forbear question or remark; I desired him to leave me: I must, and would be alone. He obeyed at once. Where there is energy to command well enough, obedience never fails (358, author’s emphasis).

It seems clear that her regained confidence and proficiency with words are rooted in the fact that Jane knows Rochester needs her, and sees, once more, a clear path for her future. This suggests, of course, that St. John's linguistic tricks had an affect on Jane largely because her longing for Rochester had somehow diminished her mental and emotional state. When Jane insists that she will be alone, the truth of her statement is taken for granted, and she is left alone; interestingly, this comes very near to a performative utterance that involves the performance not of Jane, but of St. John to match Jane's language.

As was stated earlier, one of the most common performative utterances is the 'I do' of wedding vows. Interestingly, this performative utterance does not appear in Jane Eyre, but rather is elided by some of the famous lines from the novel:

Reader, I married him. A quiet wedding we had: he and I, the parson and clerk, were alone present. When we got back from church, I went into the kitchen of the manor-house, where Mary was cooking the dinner and John cleaning the knives, and I said: 'Mary, I have been married to Mr. Rochester this morning.' . . . Mary did look up, and she did stare at me: the ladle with which she was basting a pair of chickens roasting at the fire did for some three minutes hang suspended in the air . . . but Mary, bending again over the roast, said only: 'Have you, Miss? Well, for sure!' (382).

The fact that the performative utterance of wedding vows is not shown shows a couple of things. First, it shows that Jane has reached a new psychological state; she is no longer desperate and struggling, but is, for the first time in her life, truly in control. Secondly, by describing the scene to not only the reader, but also John and Mary, this scene shows the

final stages of Jane's transition from insecure young woman with no place in the world, struggling to hang on and make a way for herself, to the authoritative author (Beatty 47-8) whose word is taken as truth, and really only exists for the reader through her language. The fact that the reader does not hear Jane say 'I do' shows both an improvement in her material/psychological state, and the final stages of her evolution to narrator.

Jane's language is a powerful tool for the remainder of Jane Eyre, and faces no other serious threats. Jane's use of powerful language begins with a vocal rejection of Mrs. Reed, and develops throughout Jane Eyre into a finely tuned tool that is able to pacify Rochester and defeat St. John. In the process, language becomes so important to Jane that the potency of her words becomes tied to her internal state, to such a great degree that Jane is only linguistically vulnerable or dishonest when something is seriously wrong with her physically, emotionally, or both. When Jane is confident about what she must do, her language is precise and powerful. In the process, Jane's language develops increasingly towards performative utterance as Jane's words and action become one, and eventually even surpasses the need for performative utterance as all Jane's words become reality through narration.

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