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THE FANTASTIC AS PERFORMATIVE. MARK TWAIN AND AMBROSE BIERCE PERFORMING THE UNREAL

In Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger* and Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" alternative realities are created solely by the power of language. The real and the unreal, whether fantastic or imagined, are intertwined and undistinguishable because both are performative constructs. Since the real is as much created as is the fantastic (as in the case of *The Mysterious Stranger*) and the fantastic is as real as the reality of here and now (as in the case of "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"), the boundaries between the real and the fantastic are regularly transgressed with ease to and fro, allowing for an ontological instability, which makes these late 19th century-early 20th century texts very modern.

Both texts are works of fantasy, satisfying the most important requirements of the genre. They both belong in the realm of the literature of the impossible, offering, as Gary Wolfe writes of the fantastic, "a clean break with reality; settings and characters may be analogous with the 'real' world, [...] but the rules that govern fantasy worlds are not necessarily consistent with our notion of reality" (72). Both are moved by what Gaston Bachelard names the "irreality function": the function that liberates the person from having to adapt ourselves to reality, from constituting ourselves as a reality" (13-14). A Tolkienian "Secondary "World" is created in both texts, complete with its own laws different from those of the real world; but inside, what is related "is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world" (37). As such, they both offer a break with the acknowledged order. In fact, such a break happens in connection with both worlds, the real and the unreal or fantastic alike, invoking, as Brian Attenbery claims, "wonder by making the impossible seem familiar and the familiar new and strange" (3). This sense of wonder permeates both texts in the form of the uncertainty (Todorov 25), hesitation (Todorov 44), and astonishment (Rabkin 5) of protagonists and readers alike: the characters as well as the reader wonder whether the experience is caused by an illusion of the senses, or the "apparently supernatural event" (Todorov 25) is indeed happening.

Yet not only are these texts fantasies, or “game[s] of the impossible,” as W.R. Irwin famously calls the fantastic (qtd. in Fredericks 37), but are language games as well, games with their own rules, accepted by all involved. As such, they exhibit traits of the performative, the type which I call logocentric or strong performative and the one I label discursive.

Logocentrism is the term which Jacques Derrida uses for the position that the stability of language—as well as systems of thought in general—rests on external anchors: the authority of the transcendental signified (“God”), or the signified which pre-exists, and has an independent existence from, the signifier. Identifying logocentrism as “the exigent, powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire for [the] signified” (1976, 49) permeating Western thought, Derrida claims that it posits a “necessity of relationship between . . . signifiers and signified . . . between the order of phonic signifiers and the content of the signifieds” (44). Applied to the performative, this logocentric way of thinking allows for words to indeed make present, by bringing about, the signified evoked by the performative utterance. In this case the performative will indeed be validated from the outside: by its power to bring about “things” external to language—things “out there.”

The foundational moment of logocentrism, when God creates by the *logos*, exploits performative power, the power of the word, in a rather obvious manner. Tying the signifier to the signified, the word brings about presence in the world “out there.” Indeed, the narrative of origin related at the very beginning of *Genesis* abounds in instances when words make things, and saying and doing are one: “Let there be light,”² “Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters,” or “Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (Gen. 1: 3, 6, 26). This “Ur-performative” is evoked emphatically at the beginning of the New Testament: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God” (John 1: 1). Commonly referred to as word magic or the power of words, and variably termed in speech act theory as illocutionary acts (108), acts of “originary performativity” (Derrida 1994, 36–37), “linguistic magic” (Fotion 51), or “performative sorcery” (Loxley 51), these are cases with a strong performative force, where the word as a vehicle of creation is used to produce some new reality. Man’s whole existence rests on the power of God’s word: “man lives from every *word* that proceeds from the mouth of the lord” (Deut. 8:3).

God creates the world by virtue of his own agency; as the Almighty, he is the absolute Agent or Subject, whose position in the sentence is fixed by Divine Law. This Law, conveyed in the *Decalogos* or *Decalogue* and reinscribed in subsequent laws, forbids man to refer to Him by the name or give his visual representation. When Moses asks his name, he says, “i am who i am” (Ex. 3:14) (in other translations, “i am that i am”). And when Moses rephrases

² Quotations are from the *New Geneva Study Bible*.

his question, asking really for a nominal form to be used in the object position in a sentence, God replies, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘i am has sent me to you’” (Ex. 3:14). In other words, there is no way to put God in the object position: his name cannot be referred to with a nominal, only by reiterating his subjecthood or self-existence, “i am.” In this text, it is indeed, as Émile Benveniste claims of subjectivity in general, “in and through language that man constitutes himself as a *subject*, because language alone establishes the concept of ‘ego’ in reality, in *its* reality which is that of the being” (729; emphasis in original). God’s subjectivity is truly a property of language: “[e]go is he who *says* ‘ego’” (729; emphasis in original). In other words: God’s ego comes about discursively and performatively: by uttering the performative *ego*: “i am.” This self-performing constitutes the kind of performativity different from the logocentric one: where words do not bring about things but other words, or discourse, and turn the utterer of the words into a subject with agency, who is capable of making things (if only within the realm of discourse).

Both types of performative participate in bringing about the fantastic in the two texts: the strong and the discursive types alike. What the boys experience as real in Mark Twain’s *The Mysterious Stranger* is created in a logocentric fashion: by word and will. As such, this text could be read as an instance of strong performativity: Satan makes clay figures, which then come to life. But by making clay figures come to life, Satan constructs himself as creator too, as an extended arm of the Almighty. Moreover, in the final twist to the story, Satan the deconstructor moves the events into mere discourse when admitting to the boys that all this is a dream. Yet here he constructs himself as an even more powerful creator and knower, an agent in the discourse of dreams.

Ambrose Bierce’s “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” could also be read as an instance of strong performativity: Farquhar sets himself free by the power of his will. His self-construction, however, occurs in discourse as well: it is by imagining his return home that he constructs himself as a free man. In the final twist added to this story, the events are here moved into the discourse of dream as the dying man imagines his escape.

PERFORMING CULTURAL SUBJUNCTIVITY IN MARK TWAIN’S *THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER*

Set in Austria in 1702 and narrated by the young boy Theodor Fischer, Mark Twain’s *The Mysterious Stranger* recounts the adventures and miracles, as well as trials, of the mysterious visit of an angel called Satan. Satan becomes the companion and idol of Theodor, provoking in the boy a passionate devotion he had not known earlier. Satan is a magical phenomenon. He seems to “prove” in so many ways that where he comes from is indeed that other

world, best understood as a duplicate of this one. He tells about life in heaven in very human terms when, for example, he describes the nursery he grew up in together with the other angels. Satan gives a dramatic performance of his supernatural powers when, in order to convince the boys about the true nature of the human race, he sets up his “theatre” (137) where he shows them—“with a thought” (134)—what has happened since the Garden of Eden. “To kill,” he says, “being the chiefest ambition of the human race and the earliest incident in its history, but only the Christian Civilization has scored a triumph to be proud of” (137). He turns lives around, but usually not for what the boys would consider the better. He makes old Wilhelm “happy” by taking his sanity away (“No sane man can be happy, for him life is real, and he sees what a fearful thing it is” [164]), while at another time he changes the “life-scheme” of their friend Fischer, whereby he will live to be ninety—except now he will go to hell, not heaven (131). Most of all, he is a man of contradictions. On the one hand, he is a Christ-like figure—he evokes the youthful Jesus of Apocrypha when making clay birds come alive (see Gibson 16) or when the crowd, which demands that Satan be killed (“Kill him, kill him!”), is pacified by the argument, “What is the use to kill the boy. . . whatever power he has, he gets from his master” (295). On the other hand, he conveys the darkest vision possible of the pitiful, limited, trivial human race. He compares the difference between the human being and himself to the “difference between a drop of water and the sea, a rushlight and the sun, the difference between the infinitely trivial and the infinitely sublime” (319). This difference, he insists, results from the fact that only the race he belongs to is capable of truly creating something out of nothing—out of thought. By the performative power of *logos*, that is.

With my race it is different; we have no limits of any kind, we comprehend all things. . . . A man *originates* nothing in his head, he merely observes exterior things, and *combines* them in his head—puts several observed things together and draws a conclusion. His mind is merely a machine, that is all. . . . a man’s mind cannot *create*—a god’s can, and my race can. This is the difference. *We* need no contributed materials, we *create* them—out of thought. All things that exist were made out of thought—and out of nothing else. (331–333; emphasis in original)

Satan gives ample demonstrations of his the illocutionary force of his strong performative: he reads people’s minds, controls their will, performs miracles of all kinds, becomes visible or invisible as he pleases (and allows the boys to borrow these powers for some time, too), can thin out like a soap bubble and vanish, makes Duplicates of everyone in the town, and gives illustrated history, psychology, and theology lessons to his friend. Some of these tricks enchant Theodor, others overpower him with utter gloom. Such is, for example, the Assembly of the Dead, which Theodor watches for hours

and hours in darkness and empty silence, “as if the world was holding its breath” (401).

This text is a virtuoso performance of boundary crossings; the characters move easily between worlds, events, and people, created or brought about purely by the power of will and word. As a portal-quest fantasy, to apply Farah Mendelsohn’s typology (2 ff.), this piece of short fiction abides by several basic principles of the sub-genre. First, not only is it about transition, but it incorporates two transitions: the first into the world narrated and constructed by Satan, the second into the non-world he presents with the final *dénouement*. Both transitions are characterized by the denial of “the taken for granted,” the positioning of “both protagonist and reader as naïve,” and the reliance on a “moral universe” (2, 5). As a reversed traveler’s tale, it presents a situation where it is not the protagonist who travels but a traveler arrives to where the protagonist is, who spends time with the protagonist(s). As such, it is a club narrative, complete with an “uninterruptable and incontestable” storyteller (6) in the “role of sage, magician, or guide” (5 ff) and a group of isolated listeners who construct “fantasyland” by accepting what they hear as “received truth” (7). It has two clearly identifiable narrators, Theodor and Satan, where the former is “the narrator of the microcosm (the world within a world),” or the “point of view character,” while the latter is the “narrator of the macrocosm, [...] who ‘stories’ the world for us” with “fragments of prophecy” (8).

The narrated events contradict the “ground rules” (Rabkin 7) of the extra-textual world in that angels do not come for leisurely visits to Earth, they do not entertain young boys by showing their tricks, and they are not really called Satan. Here the perspective informed by these ground rules is turned around, reversed, provoking amazement and wonder in the boys. Yet they see no problem accepting the existence of supernatural forces—indeed, they rather see their abstract religious knowledge put into practice by the visitor.

The hesitation which, according to Todorov, “sustains [the] life” of the fantastic (Todorov 31) comes later only, when Satan reveals that all he said earlier is untrue and that all is but a dream. This is the uncanny turn in the story (of “the supernatural explained” [Todorov 41]), where the illocutionary act turns into perlocutionary, provoking hesitation and even astonishment in both character and reader. Not only is it, to use Rabkin’s terminology, “not-expected” or “dis-expected,” but actually, indeed, “anti-expected” (8-10), which is the true marker of the fantastic. This reversal is structural in the sense that here it is perspective that changes: not only are the boys’ (religious) beliefs shaken, but their whole existence is doubted. In other words, Satan’s reversal of perspective brings about not only an epistemological but an ontological uncertainty. As he tells the boys when saying goodbye,

"Life itself is only a vision, a dream."

"Nothing exists; all is a dream. God—man—the world—the sun, the moon, the wilderness of stars—a dream, all a dream; they have no existence. Nothing exists save empty space—and you!"

"And you are not you—you have no body, no blood, no bones, you are but a thought. I myself have no existence, I am but a dream—your dream, creature of your imagination. (403–405)

This is the uncanny "conclusion" to the book, whereby Twain performs the double gesture of withdrawing both the certainty of this world and the promise of the other. Nothing can be taken for granted, even though both worlds were shown to and ascertained by the senses—"no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell" (405).

Satan acts in the spirit of what is known in philosophy as "Moore's paradox," when, after making a most credible reality for the boy, he withdraws his own belief in it. After the model of the paradox described by the English philosopher G. E. Moore, "The cat is on the mat but I do not believe it is" (qtd. in Loxley 36), Satan could be saying, "I have created a world for you, my friends, using my powers as a supernatural being, but I do not believe I have it, or that it is a world, or indeed that I am a supernatural being." In the game of make-believe he first suspends the "as if" of imagination, only to more shockingly re-impose it in the conclusion of the story. With this gesture of Satan, Mark Twain recalls the waving and then breaking of the wand of another grand magician, Shakespeare, through Prospero in *The Tempest*, saying:

Our revels are now ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air;
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with sleep. (IV, 1)

The revels are ended for Twain too; his actors were also all spirits, who melted into thin air. Life here too is "rounded with sleep."

Satan is, then, engaged in the "as if" language game of imagining and pretending, a game, to use Victor Turner's phrase, of the "subjunctive mood," concerned with "wish, desire, possibility or hypothesis" (1982, 83) Indeed, he presents a vision best captured as subjunctive cultural performance that toys with the possibility of alternative worlds created by

performative powers. The function of his performance, as is the function of all performances of cultural subjunctivity according to Turner, is to provide the individuals “with passage from one basic human state or status . . . to another” (1984, 21). Satan’s liminal game of make-believe does this crossing of thresholds twice, actually: first when the border between natural and supernatural dimensions is crossed (when little people are created, for example) and second when the reality of the real is questioned at the end.

According to Mark Twain’s conclusion, then, the two worlds are alike in being equally dreamed, imagined, or, we could say, performatively constructed: what was considered real also belongs to the unreal. Linguistically and philosophically, they show little difference: reference is such that language does not differentiate between the real and the unreal.

It is here that Twain abandons the strong performative as an illocutionary act, trading it for the perlocutionary act of bringing about amazement, wonder, and shock. This shock comes from the recognition that humankind is locked into a discourse, the discourse of dream. As such, this type of performativity is discursive, where words will only make texts, or other discursive worlds.

For up to this point, the real and the unreal are positioned as polar opposites, making the transfer from one to the other through metalepsis. But this seeming metalepsis will turn out to be intextuality: the shift between two textual worlds. As a particular case of intertextuality, both worlds prove to be fictional and textual; thus the metaleptic leap that the boys believe they can take will be no more than an intertextual leap from one to another fictional world. Ultimately, reality loses its ontological grounding: it turns out that it is this physical world that does not exist, or rather that it has been swallowed by or collapsed into the constructed-performed world of dream and imagination.

Rorty’s test concerning the ability of being referred to (1982, 117) can be performed on both the real world and the unreal: the world discursively constructed from thought and language. Although the world created by a fictional character, by Satan/Satan in this instance, is at least two removes away from the reader’s immediate reality; claims about all three levels can be equally “true.” To the skeptic’s question posed by Rorty—“how would it be different if everything were a dream? How would it be different if it were all made up? How would it be different if there were nothing there to be represented?” (1982, 129)—Mark Twain gives an answer much like Rorty: it would not be (is not) different. Truth is discursively constructed, constructed in language and by language (“truth cannot be out there” [1982, 5]): “whether a sentence has sense,” Rorty claims, “*may* be dependent upon whether another sentence is true” (1982, 129). In other words, truth is not validated by external reality—for, indeed, there is nothing outside the text. Only the

text exists for Twain too: the creative faculty, the dream (“and you the maker of it” [405]). Hence the imperative: “Dream other dreams, and better!” (404).

While the claim that the mind makes the real is wholly familiar in the symbolist tradition, here in *The Mysterious Stranger* it is not a poetic artifact that the mind makes, but reality itself. Yet this is a reality within the mind, a reality that is part of the mind, or, as J. Hillis Miller puts it in connection with Wallace Stevens, a reality which is “the figment of the mind” (256). Discursive performativity functions within the mind, bringing about such figments that give the illusion of reality only, but are actually unreal.

THE UNREALITY OF DEATH PERFORMED IN AMBROSE BIERCE’S “AN OCCURRENCE AT OWL CREEK BRIDGE”

Bierce’s most popular piece, the Civil War story written in 1891, “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” presents elaborate boundary crossings between the “reality” of the fictional characters and the imagined world of the protagonist, now two removes away from what Rorty calls our “plain ordinary spatio-temporal existence” (1982, 118). Here borders between lived and imagined, outer and inner are repeatedly transgressed, while internal monologue is presented as the narration of external events. I see the piece as a special case of descriptive pause, where the object of description is purely internal. As the portrayal of a dying man’s last moments, it is also an early example of psychological realism, offering, unbeknownst to the reader until the very end, a narrative transition between life and death. In addition, it can be considered a critique of gendered and racialized cultural spheres.

An Alabama planter who is a civilian at war-time, Peyton Farquhar lives between the social spheres of the war and women of the home; but his in-betweenness ends as he becomes feminized when approaching the home through fantasy and imagination. Moreover, his last moments are extended into an elaborate escape narrative reversing the traditional racialized roles of master and slave. Running for his life, Farquhar, the Southern white planter, is now put into the position of the black slave, going through the same experience as the escaping slaves. First he falls victim to the scheming of the Northern scout, later he is hunted down—if only in his imagination—by the enemy: in both cases he is made into an object, whose body is foregrounded. In between these two series of objectification and corporealization, he makes himself into a subject who takes control—if only, again, in his imagination.

Depicting his last moments while being executed by the Yankees, the narrative follows Farquhar’s imaginary escape and return home, to his wife and plantation, with moments of pain and suffering finally leading to a few idyllic moments, which abruptly end in death. The story is a feat of fantasy fiction, presenting both the real of the fictional narrative and the level above this fantasized reality in naturalistic detail.

As an immersive fantasy, to apply Mendelsohn's typology again (59 ff.), Bierce's story also "presents the fantastic without comment as the norm for both the protagonist and for the reader: we sit on the protagonist's shoulder and while we have access to his eyes and ears, we are not provided with an explanatory narrative" (xx). Mendelsohn calls this feature of the immersive fantasy "syntactic bootstrapping," the "reversal of information feed—show first, tell later" (83). We find here an "irony of mimesis," where the fantasy is "sealed": "it cannot, within the confines of the story, be questioned" (xx). In this fantasy world, "no magic occurs" (xxi), for "once the fantasy becomes assumed, it acquires a scientific cohesion all of its own" (xx). The extended world built in an immersive fantasy is therefore totally plausible, livable, taken for granted, one whose fantastic quality is achieved through perspective. "The point of world-building is to create something that can be existed in," Mendelsohn writes (71).

Bierce proves himself a true naturalist in his very matter-of-fact description of the scene of execution, describing the preparations and the whole machinery of war in a detached voice.

A man stood upon a railroad bridge in northern Alabama, looking down into the swift water twenty feet below. The man's hands were behind his back, the wrists bound with a cord. A rope closely encircled his neck. It was attached to a stout cross-timber above his head and the slack fell to the level of his knees. Some loose boards laid upon the sleepers supporting the metals of the railway supplied a footing for him and his executioners—two private soldiers of the Federal army, directed by a sergeant who in civil life may have been a deputy sheriff. (33)

The man "engaged in being hanged," the corporealized patient suffering these preparations, is the object of narrative as well as visual attention; the narrative voice shows no emotions, only admits that the man did not look like a villain:

He wore a mustache and pointed beard, but no whiskers; his eyes were large and dark gray, and had a kindly expression which one would hardly have expected in one whose neck was in the hemp. Evidently this was no vulgar assassin. (34)

Turning to the man to be executed, the narration ceases to focus on external events but enters the mind of the protagonist. This is the moment when—we recognize later—the real is replaced by the unreal. We follow Farquhar's gaze from his seeing position wandering "to the swirling water of the stream," the "piece of dancing driftwood [that] caught his attention," and finally to his thoughts fixed upon his wife and children (34). Indeed, this is where the real story begins, after the sergeant steps aside—and after the last

detour giving the reader the background of how Farquhar was tricked by the Northern scout.

In section III we are finally taken inside Farquhar's mind, and death will be portrayed as a spiritual process, a movement in time in several stages. Slowly he will gain control to set himself free and get away from the scene of execution. His power of thought is restored. Farquhar is able to give meaning to what he feels. Perception is becoming inner, registering psychological processes. This is followed by having first his vision restored and then coming into a full possession of his senses. Now, as one of the finest passages indicates, his perception is heightened.

He felt the ripples upon his face and heard their separate sounds as they struck. He looked at the forest on the bank of the stream, saw the individual trees, the leaves and the veining of each leaf—saw the very insects upon them: the locusts, the brilliant-bodied flies, the grey spiders stretching their webs from twig to twig. He noted the prismatic colors in all the dewdrops upon a million blades of grass . . . A fish slid along beneath his eyes and he heard the rush of its body parting the water. (37–38)

He notices the soldiers who, from his perspective, look grotesque. Efforts are multiplied on both sides: he sees and feels everything better as they start shooting at him. Finally, he manages to escape, thrown out of the stream by a vortex. Taking in all the physical sensations around him, and weeping in delight, he feels as if he was born again—probably into another world where a “strange, roseate light” shone through the trees “and the wind made in their branches the music of Æolian harps” (39). Now he springs to his feet, and his last moments before death follow the trajectory of an escape narrative, except here it is the white planter who is being hunted, not the slave. In addition, his desire for the home seems to act as a marker of femininity, appropriated by the man seeking refuge in the feminine sphere. In the final stage of his flight, after crossing all the possible boundaries—social, psychological, historical, as well as those of gender and race—the inner and the outer suddenly coincide as his neck is broken and he dies.

Two parallel worlds are presented here: the possible world, in which the hero is hanged, and the impossible, into which he escapes through the illocutionary force of the strong performative. The unreal looks as real as the former, with its very ordinary physical location where extraordinary things happen to the hero. Moreover, this world exhibits a high degree of consistency, thus satisfying the requirement of the fantastic posed by Attebery: “reader and writer are committed to maintaining the illusion for the entire course of the fiction” (2). Yet this commitment cannot be interpreted as Tolkien's “Secondary Belief” (37), for the reader does not yet know that the narrative world is not the primary world actually experienced by the protagonist. This secondary world looks so true that, as Tolkien claims, “it

accords with the laws of that [primary] world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside” (37). These two worlds clash because the former is the real, while the latter is the unreal or imagined. However, not even in the latter world do the related events contradict the laws of nature; here “the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described,” as Todorov defines the genre of the uncanny (41).

Until the very end, the reader cannot doubt the truthfulness of the escape narrative; the reader can have no idea that the narration has departed from reality and dived into the mind of the man, since the very same techniques are used for depicting the imagined as for the real. Uncertainty emerges in the reader only because, as the story progresses, certain signals point to the fantastic improbability of the escape narrative. Everything is possible in this world: ducking bullets, diving into a deep river from the gallows, freeing hands and feet from a deadly rope, swimming with fish. This is indeed a world into which heroes of the fantastic want to escape: a world which Rabkin defines as having “no entanglements” (49). Slowly, “from some affective apprehension of the impossible,” as Wolfe puts it (71), or the perlocutionary force of the performative, the reader realizes that we are in the realm of the fantastic, or the realm of the imagination, as brought about performatively.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that both texts exhibit both versions of performativity: the logocentric or strong performative, on the one hand, and the discursive performative, on the other.

Without the surprise twist concluding both stories, both could be read simply as instances of strong performativity: Satan makes clay figures which then come to life, while Farquhar sets himself free by the power of his will. But in the final twist to the Twain piece, when he admits to the boys that all this is a dream, Satan the deconstructor moves the events into mere discourse; at the same time, he constructs himself as a powerful creator of discourse, who is capable of controlling dreams even. In the final twist added to the Bierce story, as Farquhar dies, the events are here too moved into the discourse of dream as the dying man constructs himself into a living man. Recognition is indeed shocking in both cases, and the main reason for this shock lies in the ways these authors play with performativity.

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