

# The Anthropology of Speech-Act Literary Criticism: A Review Article

**Richard van Oort**

Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism  
University of Western Ontario  
London, ON Canada  
rvanoort@bosshog.arts.uwo.ca

**Angela Esterhammer. *Creating States: Studies in the Performative Language of John Milton and William Blake*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994. 245 pp.**

## I

J.L. Austin would no doubt be bemused by the debates that his 1955 lectures at Harvard have inspired, especially now that they have entered the frequently polemical world of literary and critical theory. The irony is only heightened when we remember the philosopher's own infamous disavowal of literature which he brusquely excluded from a serious consideration of a philosophy of speech acts. But literary criticism—for better or for worse—has absorbed Austin's ordinary language philosophy and applied the eminent Oxford philosopher's analysis of speech-acts to the very phenomenon that he saw as beyond its rightful jurisdiction.

As Austin's own cursory remarks to the literary utterance suggest, the interface between literature and speech-act theory appears to be founded on a curious paradox, namely: how do we reconcile a theory that concentrates on pragmatic "real-world" utterances with a theory that concentrates on utterances that are fictional, or, as Austin put it, "parasitic" on those real-world utterances (Austin 22)? This paradox in fact points to a more fundamental paradox concerning the very status of the fictional text itself. For why is it that we have a category of utterances that do not obey the normal sincerity conditions of everyday speech? Why is it that a fictional text can produce whatever constative assertions it pleases without thereby being held responsible for their truth or falsehood in the real world? In short, why is it that we have, as Margaret Atwood has recently put it, a category of utterers who are

“licensed liars” (44)?

It is into this debate between speech-act philosophy and speech-act literary criticism that we must situate Angela Esterhammer’s worthy contribution. For if Esterhammer’s book certainly does not “solve” the underlying tension between the philosopher of language and the critic of literature, it does nonetheless offer a welcome addition to the commentary currently available on the relevance of speech-act theory to the study of literature.

2

Having raised the general theoretical question of the difference between a theory of speech acts and a theory of literature, we must offer a preliminary caveat. Esterhammer’s book is not primarily intended as a theoretical investigation. Rather, its chief significance lies in its demonstration of what a literary critic, well-informed in the philosophy of speech acts, can do when she turns to literary texts. Thus Esterhammer’s main interest is in the critical possibilities opened up by speech-act theory for a consideration of the performative language in the visionary poetry of Milton and Blake. This is not to say, however, that Esterhammer’s study lacks theoretical merit. On the contrary, her opening scrupulous review of the various applications to which the doctrine of speech-act theory has been subjected is exemplary for its awareness of the divergent and often contradictory paths the theory has taken since its original exposition by Austin. Indeed, if the term “performative” has now become something of common currency—a currency frequently used with little attention to Austin’s own severe suspicion of its ultimate categorical validity—no such accusation can be made toward Esterhammer’s own careful and often insightful commentary on speech-act theory and the disparate uses to which it has been put by literary critics eager for a new source of cultural *episteme*.

Nevertheless, it is precisely the epistemological-theoretical question that remains most problematic in speech-act analyses of literature, and Esterhammer’s book here is no exception. Questions of referentiality, of ontology, and of fictionality are unavoidable when considering the applicability of speech-act theory for literature. The pragmatic domain of “ordinary language” is not the same as the aesthetic context of fictional language. The shift from the kind of pragmatic speech situation analyzed by speech-act philosophers to the aesthetic context of the literary critic must be justified by those who make this translation. This shift is not simply a matter of thematic applicability. The analytic tools of speech-act philosophy may be useful in drawing out central and enduring themes in the literary work. But as long as there is no reflection on the difference between these two contexts—the pragmatic and the fictional—there can be no reflection on the presumed unity of their ultimate source. It is to the general epistemological and ontological question that we shall turn in this review, for if Esterhammer does not always make explicit her own ontological position, we find it nevertheless implied in her account of world-creation in Genesis 1-3, the archetypal performative text and founder of, as Esterhammer perceptively recognizes, a

Western tradition of literary anthropology.

3

## II

Esterhammer's book divides naturally into two sections. The first, spanning the two opening chapters, provides the theory. Here Esterhammer gives a brief account of Austin's conception of the performative described most fully in the posthumously published *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). In addition, she refers us to some of Austin's "followers" who have expanded upon his theory in significant ways—in particular, John Searle, whose taxonomy of speech acts greatly systematizes and refines Austin's original less consistently defined categories, and Emile Benveniste who introduces the notion of subjectivity into the category of the performative. Esterhammer then provides a sketch of her own theoretical position, which, characteristically perhaps for a critic of literature, is a synthesis that seeks to weld the dry analytic tendency of modern Anglo-American philosophy (albeit the least dry speech-act version thereof) with the humane and thematic concerns of the literary critic.

Indeed it is perhaps because of this critical commitment to the more general anthropological question that Esterhammer largely bypasses the subtleties of, for instance, Austin's grammatical and syntactical analyses of the "explicit performative," or Searle's thoughtful and painstaking taxonomy of illocutionary acts. Instead she posits a more general, and indeed more sympathetically anthropological, account of the speech act that weds Austin's firm emphasis on the preestablished convention or institution necessary for speech acts to occur "felicitously" with Searle's and Benveniste's independent revisions that confer more authority on the speaking subject. The marriage of these two oppositional tendencies in the theory of speech acts—the tendency to stress, on the one hand, the importance of a collective "extra-linguistic" or institutional authority and, on the other, to emphasize the authority of the individual speaker or intentional subject—is important for Esterhammer, for it ultimately provides her with the poles of a dialectic that drives her literary-historical account of the development of visionary poetry, from Genesis to Milton, and thence to Blake. (As an aside, we may remark here on the question of a justification for Esterhammer's own theoretical position, the coherence of a theory being in part measured by the possibility for its own "historical moment" to be included within the overall dialectic.)

To fully comprehend Esterhammer's dialectic, we need to take a closer look at the notion of authority in the speech act. Now for the performative utterance to be successful, it must have authority. The question we are bound to ask then is: Whence comes this authority? Austin's account largely pins authority on the collectively bound speech act—i.e., on the rituals, ceremonies and institutions that preexist the individuals who participate in them.

Austin's prototypical example is the utterance "I do" in the marriage ceremony—the various roles of the participants, the conventions of the marriage ceremony, must already be firmly in place for this utterance to have validity, for it to be uttered "felicitously." On the other hand, both Benveniste and Searle have opposed Austin's emphatic stress on the collective or ritual speech act, suggesting that this is only one kind of performative, and that often sufficient authority resides in the speaker's intention or consciousness alone, or even that the rules of language itself are enough to make a particular performative felicitous. Thus, for instance, Searle counters Austin by suggesting that though there are a "large number of illocutionary acts that require an extra-linguistic institution" (e.g., speech acts of naming, marrying, etc.), not all speech acts are like this: "In order to make a statement that it is raining or promise to come and see you, I need only obey the rules of language" (*Expression and Meaning* 7).

#### 4

For Esterhammer, this opposition between a collective performative and a performative authorized by speaker or by language is ultimately irresolvable since the tension resides in the speech act itself. What underlies all performative utterances, Esterhammer proposes, is a fundamental dialectic. On the one hand, words appear to have the power to create states that did not exist before; on the other, they appear to be limited by the conceptions and conventions that must already exist for language to be comprehended in the first place. The former type of performative, which Esterhammer calls the "phenomenological" performative and which has especial relevance for poets and literary theorists, finds its source in the Judeo-Christian narrative of worldly origin. Esterhammer points us to Genesis 1, the Priestly narrative or "P" myth, as the archetypal phenomenological performative, since here God creates a world by his words alone. In contrast to this divine use of words to create a world stands a "fallen" or "human" vision of the performative speech act. This performative, which Esterhammer calls "sociopolitical" and which she associates more or less explicitly with Austin's conception of the performative, is dependent upon preestablished convention. This type of speech act also has a Biblical archetype—the second narrative of creation, or Jahwist account ("J" myth) of Adam and Eve's creation and expulsion from Eden. Here words are not used to create a world; rather, the central speech act is one of interdiction, the negative command that Adam and Eve are forbidden to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

As is perhaps already evident from this brief summary, Esterhammer's dual distinction between two types of performative serves more as a heuristic device than as an indication of a formal structure inherent to speech acts themselves. Thus, the distinction is not a "deep structure," a formalist *a priori*, but rather a descriptive and thematic categorization of types, types that ultimately find their source in the twin acts of creation in Genesis. As such, the distinction somewhat resembles the empirical descriptive method of speech-act theory itself with its penchant for creating categories or lists of speech acts. But Esterhammer's two categories are significantly looser than the rigid categories of, for instance, Searle's

taxonomy. Indeed it seems fair to say that the dual taxonomy Esterhammer creates is an effort to systematize literature along lines other than strictly formalist, that is, other than internal to the literary text. In this she follows the speech-act concern for context.

And yet promising though Esterhammer's dialectic is for a speech-act analysis of literature, particularly in its sensitivity to the fictional or "phenomenological" speech act, her perspective is hindered by a general evasion of the ontological question of worldly reference, of true statements as opposed to fictional ones. For it must be remembered that speech-act theory, rebellious though it was toward its logical-positivist precursors, is still hewn from the same philosophical tree, and that tree understands language as primarily referential, not fictional. Literary theorists appropriating these models are therefore inevitably plagued by the fact that they are theorists of fictional speech acts, not pragmatic functional ones.

5

Why should this present a problem? Quite simply, unlike theorists of speech acts, theorists of literature cannot look to the pragmatic scene of ordinary linguistic exchange, for this pragmatic scene has no use for fiction, as Austin's exclusion of it demonstrates. The speaker in ordinary conversation can be (and generally is) held accountable for his or her statements in a way that does not apply to the utterances of the writer of fiction. This seems to lead us to a fundamental conundrum facing the literary-critical use of speech-act theory. If speech-act theorists look to the pragmatic context of everyday linguistic exchange, to what context can literary critics look? If the aesthetic text does not obey ordinary language rules, i.e., the sincerity conditions of pragmatic conversation, whence comes its force? In short, what would an ontology of fiction look like?

Regrettably, Esterhammer does not explicitly concern herself with these crucial questions. But she does not pass them over completely. Instead, we are treated to moments of analytical insight that hint toward what such a theory might look like, even as we must ultimately be disappointed by the tentativeness of this gesture. Thus, in Chapter 1, Esterhammer observes that literary critics interested in Austin's theory have tended to follow one of two paths, paths which match her distinction between the phenomenological and sociopolitical performatives. One approach stresses speech acts *within* the text, while the other sees the literary text *as itself* a speech act. Now it should be evident that the first method unproblematically treats the literary text as a doubling of reality that provides an, as it were, ideal "laboratory" for the analysis of speech acts on the model of Austin's pragmatic analysis of real-world speech-act situations. This approach deals with Austin's exclusion of fiction (i.e., his infamous aside suggesting that fiction is merely "parasitic" on pragmatic speech) by simply ignoring the ontological problem inherent in the very *idea* of fictionality. The world of fiction is modestly accepted as unproblematically analogous to the world of pragmatic language-use. The second approach, on the other hand, appears on first sight to

be more hopeful, since it at least acknowledges the ontological paradox inherent in a mode of discourse that appears to deny the prized constative value of referentiality. The question of reference in fictional utterances has indeed been the central concern of most analytic philosophers interested in literature. Austin's most outspoken successor and inheritor, John Searle, for instance, seeks to account for the "logical status of fiction" by suggesting that the normal conditions of reference are suspended by "horizontal conventions" (*Expression and Meaning* 66).

## 6

For Esterhammer, however, these two paths ultimately merge into one, or rather form the poles of a single continuum. Thus the difference is one of degree, not one of kind. But it is here that certain theoretical problems begin to emerge, problems that once hatched lead to less readily soluble contradictions. For though there is a bona fide anthropological truth to the argument that the language of reference and the language of fiction arise from the same source, the force of this argument remains handicapped by Esterhammer's unwillingness to provide an adequate model that can incorporate her notion of a continuum more rigorously. Thus she remains content to point to the different approaches taken by literary critics, remarking that the question of speech acts internal to the literary text "easily slides over to the subtly different question of the text's status as speech act," thereby raising "more complex questions concerning the ontological status of literary texts" (16). Indeed—but what ontological criteria then do we attribute to the literary text? After making this mature observation, Esterhammer, somewhat puzzlingly, does not attempt to provide a fuller ontological account for her own perspective, preferring instead to argue that the two approaches—speech-acts *within* the text and the text *as* speech-act—are simply two sides of the same coin neither deserving of privilege or preference.

Diplomatic though this accommodation may be, it does not adequately account for the radically different status we must accord fiction in contrast with ordinary pragmatic discourse or, more problematic still, logical-scientific discourse. The upshot of this broad inclusiveness is that the notion of fictionality becomes largely a matter of arbitrary definition, the pawn of those with the power to define it. True, one may refer to a physics textbook as, in a sense, "fictional," if by fiction one means that it consists of humanly constructed models that are clearly not identical to, but rather approximations of, the reality to which they refer. Outdated scientific theories highlight the fact that science presents only approximations of the world. But though the quaintness of superseded scientific models may make them appear "fictional" in the sense that they are no longer considered true, they do not appeal to us in the way that a work of literature does. Beyond polemics, it seems there is little to be learned from such an intolerably broad notion of fiction.

A more careful scrutiny of the question of referentiality seems warranted. For are the two modes of speech-act analysis Esterhammer describes ultimately thus compatible? Is it

possible both to analyse speech acts within the fictional text on the model provided by Austin and Searle *and* to treat the literary text as a speech act itself without thereby engaging the paradox that forced Austin to exclude fiction from a theory of speech acts in the first place? The paradox is not simply a matter of emphasis-i.e., Do we choose to stress internal questions of plot and theme within the text using the insights of speech-act theory, or do we choose to study the very fictional status of the text as itself a speech act? For a little reflection tells us that the two views depend on fundamentally different ontological premises. To study the internal practice of speech acts within the text is to effectively make the text itself the empirical referent which Austin considered only available in the pragmatic speech situation of everyday conversation.

7

Now fiction may *represent* everyday speech situations in the real world, but it is itself clearly at a remove from the kind of empiricism Austin was interested in. Austin's own cursory reference to literature as "parasitic" on the pragmatic speech situation is in fact dependent, as we have already suggested, on a fairly straightforward (Aristotelian) view of fiction as a mimetic doubling of the real world. Critics who simply exchange the pragmatic world of language-use for the fictional world of literature are thus, explicitly or implicitly, subscribing to an ontology that views literature as an unproblematic mimetic representation of real-world situations. But for Austin this meta-representation, as it were, cannot provide an empirical ground for speech-act theory precisely because it is at a remove from the empirical base of pragmatic language-use. When our neighbour at the dinner table says "Could you pass the salt?" we do not sit back and admire the utterance for its fictionality. And yet if the utterance takes place within a novel, we do not, on the other hand, immediately cast around for the salt-shaker. Why is this? Despite appearances, the question is not wholly trivial. It is easy to deride the laborious attempts of speech-act philosophers to provide a logical accounting for what we find intuitively obvious. But the question is nonetheless a profound one. And all too often it is simply ignored by critics of literature.

Once we accept that there must be a categorical difference between fictional and non-fictional utterances, we cannot simply ignore the ontological implications of using speech-act theory to describe fiction, for if we do, we are willy-nilly endorsing Austin's view that fiction is derivative of-and thus parasitic on-standard empirical speech situations. And yet this view is precisely the view that literary critics inevitably (and rightly) disagree with. What we need is an ontological understanding of fictionality, one that can integrate the formal analyses of the speech-act theorists with the anthropological knowledge thematized by the literary text itself. Without such a synthesis, we indeed have little choice but to follow *tout court* in Austin's exclusion of fiction.

### III

Though Esterhammer does not explicitly concern herself with investigating the ontological status of fiction, a model is nonetheless implied in her account of the “phenomenological performative” –the speech act which seeks to emulate a divine utterance that can bring a world into being through words. Since fiction appears to create a world *ex nihilo*, that is, since it appears to defy normal conditions of reference that restrict conventional speech acts to an empirical world, it thus resembles the primordial act in Genesis 1–God’s creation of the universe. Milton and Blake, as self-conscious poetic inheritors of the Judeo-Christian model of divine origin, were only too aware of the power of the word to create, and Esterhammer insightfully points us to this primordial scene of creative utterance (“Let there be light”). This forms, for Esterhammer, the prototype of all phenomenological performatives. As the originary creation of the universe, it becomes the overt model which visionary writers such as Milton and Blake seek to emulate.

#### 8

But, of course, once a “phenomenological” model has been given to emulate, its successors no longer possess an equivalent divinity or uniqueness. With respect to the original, they appear “always-already” to be late manifestations of an original transcendence. This is in fact the latent historical dialectic that Esterhammer pins her anthropology on. The attempt to recuperate the original performative of Genesis 1 in order to share in its inherent “phenomenological” generative power is thus rendered increasingly problematic. The visionary poetry of Milton and Blake traces this path of increasing disillusionment with respect to the divine power of the phenomenological performative. Milton’s invocation of the Muse in *Paradise Lost* is supplemented by his contractual, legalistic self-presentation as an inspired individual in *The Reason of Church Government*. Likewise, Blake’s original faith in the transcendent poetic speaker (in, for instance, the *Songs of Innocence*) evolves into a bleaker vision of miscommunication and institutional corruption (the *Songs of Experience*). The tension witnessed here involves the movement from a “phenomenological” optimism to a darker “sociopolitical” pessimism. Esterhammer is not afraid to put her dialectic into a historical narrative, suggesting that the path from Milton to Blake is one of an increasing awareness of the sociopolitical dimensions of language which necessarily counter the poet’s claim to divine authority.

Enlightening though this argument is, the reader may express some reservations. For Esterhammer’s analysis tends to be modeled on the romantic opposition between the lonely creative self and the alienating social order. To be sure, Esterhammer does not uphold the kind of forthright optimistic individuality of the early first-generation romantics, but she does accept the romantic principle that the individual scene is “phenomenological” or “generative” whereas the social scene is restrictive and limiting. Thus she maintains the romantic priority of the generative individual scene over the collective scene. Beyond her



analysis of the texts of Genesis, Milton and Blake, Esterhammer gives no thought as to the possibility of a generative or phenomenological scene that is other than either theological and transcendent, or individual and romantic. Our suggestion here is that a more radical anthropology—one neither ultimately transcendental nor immanent—is needed to show how Judeo-Christian transcendence is related to the romantic scene of individual poetic secular authority.

Such an anthropology is only partially worked out by Esterhammer. Her dialectic between the phenomenological and sociopolitical is translated in terms of the “phenomenological” romantic self who stands alone against an impersonal and restrictive “sociopolitical” order. Accordingly, the self-consciousness of Blake’s poetry, which understands the alienated position of the individual poetic voice, stands in contrast to Miltonic inspiration which still adheres, if somewhat equivocally, to a traditional (neoclassical) account of divine transcendence. The poet’s authority is not his own but that of, ultimately, God. The poet thus remains only the mouthpiece of God’s voice. Milton’s elaborate opening invocation in *Paradise Lost* is made in due respect of the ultimate transcendental source of his authority to recount the narrative of “Man’s first disobedience.” With Blake, however, we move from this neoclassical Christian paradigm to a secularized scene of divine immanence. Here the poet is not simply the mouthpiece of the muse, rather, he is the very muse, the site of original creativity. But with this centring of the divine within the creative poetic self comes a simultaneous realization that the self is alone. No longer equally united before a transcendent God, self and society become irrevocably divorced; the individual stands separated from the only context left to define it, the social order, which henceforth becomes the focus of the self’s alienation and resentment.

## 9

For Esterhammer, this coming-to-consciousness of the “sociopolitical” progressively overshadows the “divine” or “phenomenological” use of language which creates worlds out of words. Increasingly, the phenomenological performative modeled on divine creativity is displaced by a sociopolitical awareness that such transcendental performativity is dependent upon an inherited institutional and conventional context. It is here that Esterhammer’s dialectical tension between two types of performative becomes more or less explicitly parallel to the romantic opposition between the (divine) subject and the (inhibiting) social order. Accordingly, Austin’s theory of the speech act, which emphasizes the preestablished conventional context necessary for language to function, represents the final dissolution of the romantic self into the social order that spawned it in the first place. In contrast, “Blake’s work,” Esterhammer suggests, “may be read as a struggle to maintain the validity of individual voice in an age when institutions, not individuals, have control over speech acts” (41).

This is a somewhat equivocal statement, for it seems to imply that prior to Blake, authority

over speech acts was indeed individual. But this runs counter to Esterhammer's implied historical dialectic, which grounds the originary source of inspiration in the centralized monotheism of Judaism. Creative inspiration here is the sole prerogative of Yahweh, the unique creator. But the secularization of this divine performative model-the omnicentric expansion of the sacred centre to the human circumference that is the contribution of Christianity-traces the path of the rise of individual "talent" as expressed in the poetry of, for instance, Milton and, more forthrightly, Blake, but also, as Esterhammer insightfully points out, in the socioeconomic sphere of the bourgeois marketplace. Milton, in his prose works, justifies his unique position as a prophetic speaker of God's word by citing his individual poetic talent. In Greek, *talanton* refers to a sum or weight of money. But it is reinterpreted by Christ's parable of the talents (Matthew 25: 14-30) as a measure of inherent individual worth. Milton's protestant conviction in the divine nature of his poetic talent exposes the complicity between the modern socioeconomic market and the Christian emphasis on the unique creative individual. The "marketability" of the poet depends upon a personal readership that protestantism in particular saw as the exclusive prerogative of the individual.

This puts an extra twist in Esterhammer's dichotomy between the individual and the social order, the phenomenological and the sociopolitical performatives. For can we not then say that the conflict between the individual and the collectivity is precisely the product of the transcendentalizing of the self-which is also to say its potential for *liberation* from the institutional context? It is only once the individual is separated from the scene of its collective origin that it can thence resent the social order which produced it. This is indeed the source of Rousseau's insight into the paradoxical nature of the social contract.

10

Likewise, for Blake, the price of individual divinity is resentment toward the social order, which now appears as an antagonistic obstacle to the self, rather than as an equally subordinated "subject" before God. Theological transcendence maintained, in principle, equality between self and society. To be sure, the implicit iconoclasm of Milton's poetry provides the model for Blake's radical anthropomorphizing of God, but Milton himself remains within the institutional framework of Christianity. When Milton invokes the muse, he is not appropriating a divine performance for himself, but in fact expressing what is, at least in principle, available to all believers who have faith in God. And this faith, regardless of individual differences, is conceived as universal.

It therefore seems truer to say that it is in Milton's age, not Blake's, that the institution-albeit a theological one-has greater authority over speech acts. With the romantic subject's internalization of Christian transcendence comes the post-romantic potential to see the individual as a self-consciously "alienated" figure, irrevocably divorced from any notion of a collective transcendental origin. But this is not simply a dispelling of

the anthropological notion of the divine—the “phenomenological” or the “originary.” Rather, the “phenomenological”—the divine—is viewed as coeval with the self. Consequently, the surrounding social order becomes more or less explicitly identified as hostile and limiting. No doubt, from the point of view of the post-romantic individual (of which we are all heirs), it does indeed appear as though institutions have control over our speech acts. But this is the very paradox of our so-called “ironic” freedom. The fact that we are conscious of the discrepancy between personal choice and an impersonal or objective social order reveals how the theological debates of Milton’s and Blake’s eras are still with us today, only the theological now appears to be upstaged by its secular offspring, the “sociopolitical.”

The paradox is in fact implicit in the second narrative of origin (the “Jahwist” account of creation) to which Esterhammer makes detailed and perceptive reference. As she suggests, the “sociopolitical” dimension is already implied in this narrative. We may suggest here, however, an alternative anthropological basis that can sharpen Esterhammer’s account of the sociopolitical aspect of the “J” text, that is, an anthropological basis that more explicitly thematizes the paradoxical tension that leads Esterhammer to make the (essentially romantic) opposition between the divine poetic legislator and an alienating social order. In this sense, what the “J” text thematizes is not so much in *formal* antithesis to a “phenomenological” performative; rather, it represents the necessarily alienated experience that the very notion of a divine performative implies. God is viewed as the ontological originator of all things, but human experience must always feel irrevocably separated from this moment of divine transcendence.

## 11

This is not merely an intellectual point of logic, for such separation breeds real human resentment—resentment which a society ignores at its peril. Judaic monotheism, by subordinating all inter-human resentment to a human relationship with a single personal God, seeks to cut resentment off at its source. Resentment is always resentment of other humans, but by redirecting unfocused multiple resentments to the central arbitral powers of a unique unapproachable God, Judaism reveals that resentment is founded on the frustrated desire for a transcendent and humanly unapproachable position of absolute centrality. Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden break their compact with God because divine interdiction, though made to prevent reciprocal unmediated violence, also inevitably breeds resentment. The creation of the covenant and the resultant resentment that leads to its subversion is no doubt the theme of the entire Hebrew Bible, but it is particularly apparent in the “J” text. Here resentment is first articulated by the serpent, who tempts Eve with a vision of its successful transcendence—“you will be like gods knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5-6). Resentment is passed on to the human community, prompting this nascent society to rebel against the divine hand that brought it into being in the first place. But the irony is that the “divine” inheritance promised to humanity by the serpent is contingent upon a human “fall” from grace, that is, upon a self-conscious awareness that transcendence

and resentment are two sides of the same coin, or, in Esterhammer's terms, that the phenomenological and the sociopolitical are two aspects of a single gesture, a gesture which, as Esterhammer's reading indicates, is essentially a linguistic gesture. Thus the collective nature of language is made prominent. For though it is available to the unique individual in a phenomenological performative, it nevertheless is always already inherited from a context that must be collective-i.e., institutional-in nature.

This is perhaps the profoundest lesson in Esterhammer's study of the visionary poetry of Milton and Blake. By analysing both poets from the point of view of her two types of performatives, she shows the necessarily collective nature of the originary phenomenological "scene of origin." The evolutionary path Esterhammer maps out-from the text of Genesis, to Milton, and thence to Blake-reveals the increasing awareness that the anthropology of the Biblical account of origin is also an account of the romantic generative scene of individual origin. Milton's emphasis on individual talent (already a premonition of the rise to eventual supremacy of the bourgeois marketplace where individual talent becomes the currency for collective interaction) is an early intuition of the full-fledged romanticism of Blake's divinized poetic creator. But with this divination comes a deeper awareness of the complicity of the individual and the social order against which the self struggles for definition.

Though Esterhammer never formulates her notion of the phenomenological performative in terms of an "originary scene," her study nonetheless points us toward something which in the philosophy of speech acts has been profoundly lacking, namely, a historical-anthropological approach to linguistic utterance. This is not to say that we can treat aesthetic texts as an alternative to the pragmatic speech situation. On the contrary, we have already seen the problems with such an easy translation. But it does suggest the necessity for a historicization of what ordinary language philosophy-in a typically metaphysical gesture-dismisses with alarming alacrity, namely, the deeply layered anthropology underpinning our everyday speech acts. If Esterhammer does not quite provide us with a wholly satisfying theoretical framework that convincingly synthesizes the synchronic-analytic models of speech-act theory with the anthropological perspective latent in the texts of Genesis, Milton and Blake, she does nevertheless provide us with an analysis that makes a significant step in that direction. And this, to be sure, is no small achievement.

## **Works Cited:**

Atwood, Margaret. "Silencing the Scream." *Profession* 94. New York: MLA, 1995. 44-47.

Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words*. 1962. 2nd ed. Cambridge Massachusetts:

Harvard UP, 1975.

Esterhammer, Angela. *Creating States: Studies in the Performative Language of John Milton and William Blake*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994.

*The New English Bible*. 1970.

Searle, John R. *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*. Cambridge: U of Cambridge P, 1979.