A Note on J. L. Austin and the Drama

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There is, of course, a substantial literature on the theory of drama, and writers in the field have always found that the nature of dramatic action presents particular conceptual problems. One of those is that in all but a handful of plays there is scarcely any of what we normally mean by 'action'. A play that we describe as being 'full of action'—nowadays the advertisements would probably call it 'an action-packed drama'—consists for the most part of people talking to one another. The physical action in a play is usually for the most part trivial and slight: characters walk about the stage, pick up objects and put them down again, sit in chairs and get up out of them. It is strikingly the case that if there is indeed dramatic physical action, like a fist-fight or a shoot-out, it takes up only a couple of minutes out of the whole evening—in the case of shooting perhaps only seconds. Yet we may come out of a play feeling that it is, indeed, full of action, with one remarkable happening following another, and all of them hitting hard on our emotions.

Or we may come out feeling that there was 'not enough action'. Yet in the second case the characters will have been doing much the same things as in the first: walking around the stage, sitting about, talking to one another. What can this 'action' be that consists mostly of people talking? And how can it be that some such talk is 'full of action' while other talk contains 'not enough action'? Clearly, by 'action', we cannot mean the same thing when we are talking about plays as we do when we talk about most other human activities. But in that case, what do we mean?

I believe that if we look at J. L. Austin's development as a philosopher, interesting and important light is cast on these questions.

Austin early on drew people's attention to a class of statements that he called 'performative utterances'. Examples are: 'I thank you'; 'I congratulate you'; 'I apologize'; 'I bet'; 'I promise'. At first his chief concern in bringing them forward was to show, in defiance of the Logical Positivists, that there are meaningful statements in the indicative that cannot be said to be true or false in any normal sense, and are therefore not verifiable, because they do not describe an action but perform it—and a deed cannot be either true or false.

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Discussion

When a bride says 'I will' she is not describing or predicting her marriage to the groom, she is marrying him in the very act of uttering those words. Not surprisingly, this perception of Austin's caught the fancy of a great many people in philosophy, partly because there was something intrinsically intriguing about it, but also because of its damaging implications for Logical Positivism, which was insisting that meaningful statements must be either verifiable or tautologous.

Austin went on to look for a way of drawing clearly the distinction between 'performatives' and indicative statements that are not in themselves actions and can therefore be said to be true or false because they are descriptions of reality—because they are only sayings, as it were, as against doings. And he found, to his surprise, as time went on, that the distinction could not be drawn. It was slowly borne in on him that all utterances are actions. In his attempts to distinguish the special case from the rest he found the special case swallowing up all the others. Whenever we say anything meaningful we are doing something: we are asking, explaining, ordering, describing, narrating, implying, warning, insisting, boasting, begging, and so on and so forth, almost indefinitely. Austin arrived eventually at the claim that in the English language there are something like a thousand distinguishable verbs or verb-phrases naming actions that we perform when we speak. For these he appropriated what has become the familiar term 'speech-acts'.

It is my contention that dramatic action consists almost entirely of speech-acts in this sense, and that the amount of 'action' a play is felt to contain depends on the nature and distribution within it of different sorts of speech-act. Some speech-acts are emotionally a great deal more energy-charged than others. Opposing, rejecting, denouncing, scolding, berating, threatening, betraying and blackmailing are emotionally far more violent, at least usually, than agreeing, accepting, welcoming, approving or mollifying. A group of characters just sitting around on a stage talking may be committing speech-acts of extreme emotional violence against one another, or they may be perpetrating no emotional violence at all—or of course any of the possible gradations and mixtures in between. If many of the exchanges are powerfully charged and effective the audience may come out at the end feeling that a lot has gone on, a lot has happened, and there has been a great deal of action—and so there has, but it has been speech-action.

What is most important about the dramatic action may not necessarily lie on the surface. Effects can be understated. It is the mark of an inferior playwright to have the characters spell out everything that is going on. Skilful playwrights are adept at presenting one

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speech-act behind the mask of another: for instance an apparently innocent question may be full of concealed menace—an effect for which Harold Pinter is justly renowned: the character appears to be simply asking but is in reality threatening. In this sort of way good play-writing will tell the audience what is 'really' going on unspoken under the surface. In Chekhov's *Three Sisters* the married sister's sudden remark that she will, after all, accept an earlier invitation to stay for lunch makes the whole audience realize in that instant that she is sexually attracted by the stranger who has just dropped in, yet no one on the stage has mentioned anything to do with such a thing; they are all milling around talking of quite other matters. By the end of the play we understand, and Chekhov has intended us to, that in the past the doctor has had a secret relationship with the sisters' mother, long dead, and is in fact the father of the youngest of the sisters; yet no one in the play has said or hinted anything to this effect, and in fact it is clear that none of the characters in the play knows it except for the doctor himself, and he is not going to reveal the secret. This is how masters of the theatre work, with Shakespeare as the *ne plus ultra*. You have to be quite exceptionally skilled and imaginative—not only that but also experienced in live theatre—to be able to understand a great play merely by reading it, for its meaning is revealed only in performance, in an audience's reactions to unstated things. But it is all done by an almost unbelievably skilful and subtle manipulation of speech-acts—their cunning selection, their psychological penetration or truthfulness, or deliberate misleadingness, or whatever it may be; and of course, very importantly, their dramatic positioning; and I believe that it is in what is 'done' by and through speech-acts, in these and other ways, that dramatic action mostly consists.

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