

Performative Inferentialism: A Semiotic Ethics

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Since J. L. Austin inaugurated the conversation about the performative utterance a vast literature has grown up around the term, though almost all of it directed to the uses of language. In the present essay I suggest that, in the light of certain theories of inferentialism, the performative can be usefully ascribed not just to acts of speech but also to works of art, cultivated or manufactured landscapes, and the action of human bodies. Drawing from a range of influential work in aesthetics, performance studies, and performative theory, as well as a robust philosophical literature, I propose a theory of performative inferentialism to account for these other kinds of performatives. And just as the performative utterance sheds new light on the contractual or legal nature of speech, I contend that performative inferentialism entails a kind of interpretation or reading that reveals significant insights into the moral nature of action, gesture, and creation—and consequently denotes a semiotic ethics.



Ask not, Of what use is a scholarship that systematically retreats? or, Who is the better for the philosopher who conceals his accomplishments, and hides his thoughts from the waiting world? Hides his thoughts! Hide the sun and

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moon. Thought is all light, and publishes itself to the universe. It will speak, though you were dumb, by its own miraculous organ. It flows out of your actions, your manners, and your face.

—R. W. Emerson¹

I. A Preface for Performance

Maybe Plato’s banishment of poetry from his republic was a covert admission that he feared the mortifying effects a writer might have on a reader’s sense of the ideal. Among writers, poets, especially lyric poets, are suspected of creating work that is far from the real, and accused of fabricating deceptions. Plato’s ambition was to secure a realm of universals—the untouched, the unmarked, and the eternal. But when philosopher-kings make their claim, the appeal must always be made in language, and that’s a rather unhandsome fact, one that contaminates essence with a presence. And so any human expression is touched and tainted by the writer’s own hand. The Platonic fantasy for philosophy—where this mark, where this effect goes unacknowledged—has continued, century after century, and erupts into view in the most peculiar and persistent ways. A predominant instance includes taking philosophical writing as transparent, as if the writer’s prose were an isomorphic dictation from his mind—never passing through the hand that writes it; where the separation between author and idea is raised to the level of a creative and intellectual virtue. Any first person singular prose becomes a euphemism for the general class, and so “truth” is not spoken from any particular mouth, but from a mouth capable of being anything but particular. Consequently the voice of philosophy, even and especially in its *written* form, tends toward the conceit that a philosophical proposition ought to be disabused of its connection to a person. Philosophical authority, at last, comes at the cost of eliding its author. I contend that such banishment, suppression, or denial is unfounded: that any expression must always be a created expression, and so authored; that in denying the connection between author and work, philosophy has forsaken genuine and rich fields of investigation, namely its own original and ongoing tasks—the exploration of human life in its radical embodiment. In what follows, I develop a theory that countermands these consequences and counteroffers another vision of philosophy for philosophy—one that maintains an openness to a spectrum of philosophical performances, including the proposal that such performances need not be written.

I am, then, arguing against certain conventional habits of defining “text,” and the interpretations that follow from them, as always exclusively written. At the heart of my argument is the idea of taking “writing” and “text” analogically, that is—seeing writing as something done in ways beside the application of ink on paper, or regard-

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Literary Ethics,” *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Concord Edition (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1904), vol. 1, p. 187, ln. 2.

ing a text as something more than a collection of ordered words. Thus writing, or inscription, can be achieved in a variety of modes, and a text can emerge as any discrete unity of thought or action. The book as much as the building, the theatrical play as well as the play of a game, may be regarded as texts, and can—when coupled with an interpretive frame and principles of value—respond, critically and otherwise, to diverse forms of textual expression. Recasting the term “text” is essential to the constructive project underway here, which I call performative inferentialism.²

Perhaps the most common inflection of what I mean by performative inferentialism comes in the conventional notion of “body language”—a metaphor that internally conveys an appreciation for nonverbal communication, specifically kinesthetics. Sign-language is another relevant form, though the nature of “saying” here has a more codified grammar than body language as such, since the latter relies on a stricter alphabet of letters, symbols, and pre-formulated physical movements. With body language, one is said to “read” the body as if it were making propositions: I’m tired, I’m content, I’m afraid, I’m lying, I’m attracted, I’m nervous, etc. One’s facial expressions (perhaps especially the conduct of one’s eyes), posture, tone of voice, bodily gestures, and other nuances of physical movement all become viable data upon which inferences can be drawn. The idea that there is such a thing as body language means that some people have already grown used to speaking analogically about things *other than words* having a “language,” and, insisting that it is legitimate to make inferences based on the model of a grammar, e.g., where one knows the difference between the look of grief and joy as it is written on one’s face. Furthermore, one often can discern when such expressions are feigned—for example, when one spies a forced smile or inadvertent tear. Knowing a body language would not be unlike what Wittgenstein calls a “language-game.”³ One “plays” it—the game of language—by articulating or performing it. To understand a given embodied proposition, one must be familiar with the grammar (rules) of that (language) game. Thus, the art critic is said to “read” a painting; this often involves an immersion in the language-game of art criticism, the language-game of painting, and so on. Yet, what if there are many body languages—games of language that we play, each with its own distinct grammar? And what if a

² “Performative” is a term made famous by J. L. Austin in his series of William James Lectures given at Harvard in 1955, and subsequently published as *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962). Austin describes the performative as an “act of speech,” which is to say, a kind of speech that is an *action* (20). When a performative is uttered something is not merely stated, but *done*—such as when the betrothed declares “I will” or “I promise” at a marriage ceremony.

As with the idea of “text,” I adopt the use of “performative” in order to make it analogically significant to linguistic and *nonlinguistic* acts. In the context of performative inferentialism, “performative” means *any* performance, since *every* performance already qualifies as an action. Painting, farming, and waiting tables are, in this sense, all performative acts, which may involve instances of (performative) speech acts.

³ See Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1953), esp. §§ 1-38 (1-18).

theory could be drafted in defense of this multiplicity of body languages so that one could speak of them as independent but related, as differing yet sharing a structural correspondence and commonality?

Developing a theory of inferentialism seems the most direct and promising way of responding to these questions. Asking about the possibility of taking something as a text, and asking whether it is permissible to read it, requires a sense for the limits of inference. What can and cannot be inferred about a given object, event, or idea? Because many bodies, not just living, human bodies avail themselves to inference, there is a wide range of inferential possibilities. *Reading* a body, then, means nothing more than, and it need not mean anything more than, the capacity to make inferences based on the way things stand in a given state of affairs. Reading, in this view, means discerning the criteria that make certain inferences possible. For example, on the cusp of making an inference, one may feel a need to define or defend the criteria for judgment: “Can I say this act of service is brave? Does this painting truly inherit the prior work I’m thinking of? Can I claim this building achieves an architectural innovation? Will this athletic performance change the nature of the sport?” These are questions about the limits of inference: what interpretation can be made and still hold up as bearing on, or maintaining a relation to this particular work and its wider context? To ask these questions means that one is already reading bodies as texts, trying along the way to assess what sorts of inferences can be made about them.

The foregoing account, in some sense, should not seem foreign to even the strictest and most common definitions of ‘reading,’ which can mean: (as a first set of entries) “to look at or otherwise scan,” “to study the movements of (as lips) or the formation of (as smoke signals) or the manipulation of (as signaling flags).”⁴ It is familiar to speak of reading a map, a trail, tracks left by animals, the dance and design of hands (in sign-language), and even metaphorically—a mind.⁵ Reading, then, is an orientation and practice of sensuous perception—usually a way of looking at the world, a way of accounting for its movements through visual assessment. But I want to emphasize the way nonvisual faculties “read” the world; so, music is read through the ears, affection is read through the hands and skin, and a meal is read through the nose and tongue.

Reading is what we do. To adduce just a portion of the many ways in which reading gets done, consider how the artist reads a painting, the architect reads the building, the playwright reads theatre, the musician reads music, the photographer reads still images, the filmmaker reads moving images, the chef reads cuisine, the fashion designer reads clothes, the detective reads the crime scene, the forensic scientist reads the corpse, the athlete reads athleticism, the gardener reads the garden, the mason reads the stone wall, and, the mechanic reads the automobile. And each of these has a

⁴ *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Publishers, Inc. 1993), 1889.

⁵ *The American Heritage College Dictionary*, Third Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993), 1136.

parallel in *criticism*: so there is the art critic, film critic, the architecture critic, the epicurean, the sportscaster, the test driver, and so on. What they have in common—both as creators of work and critics of work—is this talent, executed with a range of depth and insight, of seeing, of reading. Each segment of reading practice is focused on a body, and these practitioners and critics read the bodies, make inferences based on their perceptions, and then have their assessments rest on the quality of reasons, warrants, and qualifications that define their interpretations. In short, they make inferential commitments in the course of reading.⁶ And this has everything to do with the manner in which these texts are held up as deserving and sustaining such interpretation. That is, the food critic doesn't hesitate to believe that the well-made meal is worthy of his attention, nor that his critical appraisal is squandered if the food disappoints.

Despite the fact that even the most standard definition of reading contains this expansive sense of perceptual judgment, there is little one can do to override the investments in a word—reading—that, for the most part, has come to mean what one does with a book. With this in mind, I turn to performing in the anticipation that it might be taken up as a parallel notion to reading. In particular, I deploy 'performance' to refer to all texts *and* the activities of interpreting them. Thus the cuisine and the culinary criticism alike are performances, each with their own possibilities for (allowing and resisting) inferences. I do not introduce performance merely to delight in the pleasures of recommending a worthwhile synonym for reading, but rather to clearly articulate the ways in which the remarkable concept of performance elucidates realms of human experience that the idea of reading conventionally does not, or has not, and perhaps cannot, account for.

Furthermore I wish to address habits of privileging written texts in humanistic endeavors, especially philosophy. Just as Derrida has criticized philosophy for being logocentric (valuing speech and presence above their inverses), I quarrel with philosophy when it is casual, indifferent, or defensive about the legitimacy of a wider range of texts for inquiry. Not only do I suspect that textual performances of many types other than merely written (in the conventional sense) are informative for philosophy, I think they are crucial to the vitality of ethical theories. For this reason, to be elaborated on in what follows, I advance performative inferentialism as a semiotic ethics. This involves taking signs as rich fields of discursive moral content. Such a system or network of fields would then denote a fundamental inclusivity of texts, where one cannot isolate, neither privilege nor denigrate, a kind of sign and insist that it is beyond the scope of judgment. Since everything is availed to interpretation, the task of reading a text involves decisions about what is most relevant and fittest for corroborating one's claims. One could say that the difference between interpretations rests primarily on what is and what is not emphasized, and how the specified attributes are arranged. The challenge, then, would not be to justify how an object or act achieves

⁶ I borrow the phrase "inferential commitments" from Elijah Millgram. See *Practical Induction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), e.g., 17.

status as a text, but to supply the warrants that make such a text pertinent to critical endeavors—in philosophy, and elsewhere.

II. Illegitimacy and Inference: What Can and Cannot Be Read

Before staging my sense of how the core sentiment of performative inferentialism is already underwritten in the work of some theorists, I pause briefly to assess some views that are at odds with my proposal, views that have as their hallmark an opposing understanding of texts. It would be profitable to explore, for example, how remarks by Plato, Longinus, Philo, Origen, Augustine, Spinoza, Schleiermacher, and most recently the New Critics, rest on what might be called a literal understanding of reading, and thus a highly constrained definition of ‘text’—a definition that is often presumed, but seldom explicitly stated. It is enough to say, at this point, that these many writers, over so many centuries, share a deep and abiding affection for the written text, even as, ironically, most of them do not regard such texts as the true object of inquiry, but rather the means to something else. For them, writing is an approximation of a performance (e.g., in Plato, of the Real), or a reference to it, but never quite the performance itself. At the same time that the written text carries the weight of the philosophical project, its style is held in suspension—as if the books were not so much written as direct and impartial evidence for what is written about. I would call this a conceit about the aspiration to have one’s writing seem unwritten; to present it, however innocently, as eternal, ahistorical, or de-personalized and therefore as unauthored—suggesting, somehow, that the work is generated *ex nihilo*.

An abiding problem, then, rests in the consequences of taking the written text as the *de facto* site of legitimate inference, which thereby siphons off the myriad other instances of performance that might possess qualities that are both attractive and pertinent to difficult inductive enterprises. To make this more concrete, consider how Roland Barthes (in “The Death of the Author”) describes the relationship between an author and what an author writes: “. . . [I]t is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality . . . , to reach that point where only language acts, ‘performs’, and not ‘me’.”⁷ Barthes commits himself to two things: first, that language is the only agent of linguistic performance; and, secondly, that “the body writing” (as he puts it) “slips away” and “all identity is lost.”⁸ Barthes worries that making the author relevant to the thing written is a catastrophic hindrance to interpretation: “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.”⁹ Barthes imagines that if we allow something of Balzac’s life into the field of interpreting his novella *Sarrasine*, our claims about the work might be constrained (for example, by competing evidence from Balzac’s personal history), as if literature were some kind of report on life and not—as

⁷ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, tr. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 143.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

Barthes would have it—an invention wholly separate from it. Literature’s independence from the author, on these terms, delegitimizes the use of history (including personal history) as a counterfactual for the truth of literature. Yet where Barthes calls for the reduction of possible lines of inquiry (e.g., by dismissing the presence of the author for interpretations of the texts he is said to have authored), I see a potential multiplication: the more sites one can consider, the more intensive one’s interpenetrating inferences about literature may be. Importantly, my recommendation does not encourage an appeal to historical reality as a *verification* of literature, or literary truth, or even its truth-effect in the lives of readers; rather, more limitedly, I aim to leave open the question whether the text is closed, that is, to remain agnostic about whether the interpretation of a work of literature may not be enriched by fields beyond the borders of the given text. Bringing Balzac (the author) into conversation with *Sarrasine* (the book) is nothing but the expansion of textual fields, and in this case and it would seem for many others, fields that intimately overlap—lending credence to a new set of reflections on an author’s life and the works he or she creates.¹⁰

In reply to Barthes’ well-received antagonism to the relevance of authors to their texts, however, one could ask: Why would *Sarrasine* be more limited, or distorted, by the consideration of Balzac’s life—if treated as a text in its own right—than by the words Balzac chose in his composition of *Sarrasine*—since the choice of those words are among the facts that comprise Balzac’s autobiographical experience? Regarding the composition of *Sarrasine* as part of Balzac’s life—and hence his performance of authorship—may only yield a tautology of inconsiderable interest. But it seems difficult, perhaps impossible, to predict such a judgment beforehand and in every case. In Foucault’s contribution to this debate, in “What is an Author?,” he notes: “It is a very familiar thesis that the task of criticism is not to bring out the work’s relationships with the author, nor to reconstruct through the text a thought or experience, but rather to analyze the work through its structure, its architecture, its intrinsic form, and the play of its internal relationships.”¹¹ So the problem is not what the task of inquiry should be, but, as Foucault has it, how we define what counts as a “work,” or, a text. All of a sudden, the matter at issue is not logical, but terminological. The definition of ‘work,’ parallel to what I’m calling ‘text,’ must be disclosed in radical and extensive explicitness in order to mount any argument for its viability for interpretation across textual fields, as mentioned above.

¹⁰ Such “textual fields,” as I call them, may also be considered in relation to what film scholar David Bordwell has named “semantic fields.” However, Bordwell’s term is more limited than I would like for my recommendations in the present investigation: “A semantic field is a set of relations of meaning between conceptual or linguistic units” (106). Perhaps the definition could be modified to include what might be called “performative units,” a terminological expansion that would reflect the range of performances I aim to draw attention to. See David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), see esp., ch. 5.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 103.

While Barthes tends to present his work principally as comments on the status of the author, there is an underlying—self-reflexive—effort to engage the very definition of the term ‘work,’ an effort that however seldom culminates in a satisfyingly clear notion of the term. Still, the burden of developing an alternative to—or even a modified version of—Barthes’ position lies in establishing the criteria by which one can separate the readable (and relevant) from the illegible (and irrelevant), and thereby identify defensible contexts or conditions in which to make inferences. To create an alternative account or to modify it, we would need to be able to articulate a perspicuous sense of what counts in our interpretation of texts, and thus, what qualifies *as* a text.

In the next three sections, I argue that the central idea of performative inferentialism is already present, or in some fashion implied, in the work of Harold Rosenberg, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Jean-Paul Sartre. In conversation with their reflections on identity, ethics, and the legibility (and legitimacy) of performative works, I develop an explicit definition of ‘text’ that constitutes the focal point, and corrective recommendation, of performative inferentialism. In part, I define the notion by looking closely at models of interpretation that embody the very notion itself—models, I believe, offered by Rosenberg, Emerson, and Sartre. All three writers possess an informed generosity in their speculation of what count as readable things or phenomena, where “speculation” carries the weight of both conceptualizing and seeing. I draw inspiration from their interpretive expansiveness to address three distinct aspects of ‘text’—aspects that enlarge it beyond the strict scope of the book or linguistic document. Furthermore, these models should provide a context in which to think about the moral dimension of performance, and interpreting performance, that I develop in the concluding section.

III. Abstract Painting and the Autobiography of Art

In asking whether there is something “new” in the American post-World War II movement in abstract painting, Harold Rosenberg writes: “. . . a definition would seem indispensable.”¹² Just as I have acknowledged the need and vital significance of having a clear definition of ‘text,’ Rosenberg seeks a conception of the ‘new.’ Both pursuits inherently stake demands for criteria. Rosenberg demands conditions for an understanding of the new, and he works to fulfill the demand through a search for the *difference* abstract painting embodies over prior modes and models of the art. Analogously, the criteria for defining a text are, I suggest, drawn out by Rosenberg’s methodology.

In abstract painting, the canvas ceased to be a place where a prior concept—an image or an idea—could be illuminated, and as Rosenberg explains, it “began to appear . . . as an arena in which to act. . . . What was to go on the canvas was not a pic-

¹² Harold Rosenberg, “The American action painters,” *Art News* 51 (December 1952), 22.

ture but an event.”¹³ The painting, as abstract, could not be said to *depict* a scene, rather it must be regarded *as* a scene. An encounter with a painting by Jackson Pollock, for example, brings one into the space of an event that has left traces of its occurrence. The painter manipulates the materiality of the painting (the canvas, stretcher, gesso, oil color, etc.); he establishes the enduring relations that obtain between the material elements (e.g., the strokes or “drips” of paint). The artifact we are left with, however, is not a picture of something, but the something itself. The painting is a site of the radical sanguinity of the painter and the paint: every brush stroke or paint splatter signals the prior presence of the artist, every line a confirmation of his existence. It is, then, quite compelling, and not at all a figure of speech, to say “The work before us is a Pollock”—thereby, erasing the distinction between the body of the painter and his body of work.¹⁴ Rosenberg reaches the same conclusion about abstract painting:

A painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist. The painting itself is a “moment” in the adulterated mixture of his life—whether “moment” means, in one case, the actual minutes taken up with spotting the canvas or, in another, the entire duration of a lucid drama conducted in sign language. The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist’s existence. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life.

It follows that anything is relevant to it.¹⁵

And since the artist himself created the work, the work is not just part of the biographical facts of his life, but is itself a work of autobiography. In this passage consider how Rosenberg establishes two claims that are directly opposed to those given by Barthes: first, that the art and artist form a continuity (therefore, one cannot delineate where the one ends and the other begins); and secondly, by virtue of the first point, that anything is relevant to the painting (meaning that things “beyond” the painting—such as the artist and his context—are nevertheless coextensive with it). Intriguingly, Rosenberg makes one exception to this inclusivity: art criticism. Or, more particularly, the art critic who does not appreciate the intimacy, indeed, identity of painter and painting: “The critic who goes on judging in terms of schools [instead of in terms of individual auto/biographies], styles, form, as if the painter were still concerned with producing a certain kind of object (the work of art), instead of living on the canvas, is

¹³ Rosenberg, 22.

¹⁴ Rosenberg comments on another aspect of taking the work of art as a surrogate for the artist: “What is a painting that is not an object nor the representation of an object nor the analysis or impression of it nor whatever else a painting has ever been—and which has also ceased to be the emblem of a personal struggle? It is the painter himself changed into a ghost inhabiting The Art World. Here the common phrase, ‘I have bought an O.’ (rather than a painting by O.) becomes literally true. The man who started to remake himself has made himself into a commodity with a trademark.” Where the artist’s *name* becomes such a trademark. *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

bound to seem a stranger.”¹⁶ I would argue that even if the art critic is not sensitive to Rosenberg’s definition of the new in art, and its implications for textual interpretation, the critic remains subject to the metaphysical point already made, namely, that the art and artist are composed of the same “substance.” From my vantage, the art critic is still crucially relevant to the community of interpreters even when he fails to acknowledge the nature of the work before him. The critic’s perceptual impairment or conceptual elision merely becomes part of his thesis; and this too is instructive.

Six years after Rosenberg’s essay on American action painters, and two years after Jackson Pollock’s tragic death, Allan Kaprow wrote an essay entitled “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock.” In his remarks Kaprow sustains several of Rosenberg’s contentions, and remains loyal to two of Pollock’s own statements about his work: “Painting has no beginning or end” and “I am in the painting.”¹⁷ If, as Rosenberg contends, “anything is relevant” to the painting, then one’s whole life must be relevant—hence the limitlessness and boundlessness of the painting. It will have been created over a discrete period of time, and have physical termini (e.g., the edge of the physical canvas), but the painting itself is constitutionally linked with the painter, and therefore with the painter’s world. Kaprow writes:

I am convinced that to grasp a Pollock’s impact properly, we must be acrobats, constantly shuttling between an identification with the hands and body that flung paint and stood “in” the canvas and submission to the objective markings, allowing them to entangle and assault us. This instability is indeed far from the idea of a “complete” painting. The artist, the spectator, and the outer world are much too interchangeably involved here. (And if we object to the difficulty of complete comprehension, we are asking too little of the art).¹⁸

Note how Kaprow’s syntax—“a Pollock’s”—concentrates his claim about the intratextual nature of the art and the artist, and the world that contains them. The painting began before Pollock painted it, and it did not cease to be painted when Pollock finished painting it; it is an event that exceeds its spatial and temporal “making.” The painting is the site of a complex coalescence and consolidation of histories, biographies, and autobiographies, and therefore cannot be quarantined without, at the same time, divesting it of its richness as a text.

From the way Rosenberg, Kaprow, and even Pollock himself, assess the character of American action-paintings, I wish to draw a first premise for performative inferen-

¹⁶ Rosenberg, 23.

¹⁷ *Jackson Pollock*, 51, dirs. Hans Namuth and Paul Falkenberg; narration, Jackson Pollock; music by Morton Feldman; music scored and played by Daniel Stern. 10 min. color.

¹⁸ Allan Kaprow, “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock” (1958), *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 5. The book of work by Kaprow bears the title “Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life,”—a characterization that contains the sentiment of Rosenberg’s line “The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life.” Rosenberg, 23.

tialism, namely, that the emergence of a material residuum from a performance ought to be regarded as a genuine sight of textual interpretation, and that the work, whatever its formal qualities, should be sufficient for making its own claims, and advancing its own argument. The fine arts (painting, photography, film, sculpture, dance and modes of performance art, architecture, design, etc.) and technical crafts and sciences (mechanical, biophysical, computational, linguistic, genetic, aeronautic, etc.) stand in analogical relationship to the example of (the) painting. The material artifacts of performance have no beginning and no end, and the performer is forever *in* the material acted out or upon. As such all artists, regardless of their chosen media, are performers in a broad sense; this is especially evident when the artist is the medium (as with a dancer), but it is also a feature of artists whose media are manipulated beyond their own bodily terrain (as with painters such as Pollock). In terms of identity relations, I am what I do; and what I do or create remains coextensive with who I am.

IV. Terrestrial Textuality: Emerson and the Signs of Life

In *Nature*, published in 1836, Emerson composed his first philosophical book. Unlike his many previous sermons, this concise but fertile excursus signaled a new orientation. The religious was linked to the naturalistic thereby giving an empirical ground to an otherwise transcendental situation. The radical syllogism he proposed to defend this connection amounts to nothing short of materializing divinity, as when he writes that “Words are signs of natural facts,” and that “Nature is the symbol of spirit.”¹⁹ Emerson wrote to a community, and in a time, that was largely indifferent—though sometimes openly hostile—to this sacred naturalism. Nevertheless, the result is an argument that both defines and defends the idea that Nature is, in fact, a legitimate and legible text, and the principal foundation of moral instruction.²⁰ “This ethical character so penetrates the bone and marrow of nature,” Emerson writes, “as to seem the end for which it was made.”²¹

Thinking of Emerson’s appropriation of symbols, often to define other signs and phenomena, I wish to consider his extended references to the farm and farmer. It is apparent that the farm stands upon that space in which the human and the natural most intimately coordinate; the farmer is taken as the mediator between these forms, and is poised to judge the quality and significance of the relation—what today is probably, less poetically, called agricultural science. Still, wonder abides, since according to Emerson, “every natural process is a version of a moral sentence. The moral law lies at the centre of nature and to the circumference.”²² While there are diverse

¹⁹ Emerson, *Nature*, 1.25 5 and 1.25 8.

²⁰ And Emerson later says: “A good symbol is the best argument.” “Poetry and Imagination,” 8.13 22.

²¹ Emerson, *Nature*, 1.41 6.

²² Emerson, *Nature*, 1.41 25. Here Emerson says more about the moral dimension of nature: “Sensible objects conform to the premonition of Reason and reflect the conscience. All things are moral; and in their boundless changes have an unceasing reference to spiritual nature.

philosophies and religions that regard nature with divine reverence, Emerson is especially invested in the attribution of semiological characteristics to the natural realm. Often this semiology is overtly linguistic, as above with the “moral sentence,” or when he writes about the delimited terrestrial domain known as a farm:

All things with which we deal preach to us. What is a farm but a mute gospel? The chaff and the wheat, weeds and plants, blight, rain, insects, sun,—it is a sacred emblem from the first furrow of spring to the last stack which the snow of winter overtakes in the fields.²³

Some of the inscription is made by nature (weeds, blight, rain, insects, sun, etc.), and some is the effect of the farmer’s hand (the first furrow, the last stack). The “things” the farmer deals with are composed in nature, and he must respond to them in that context. But the farmer cannot react unless he can understand what is being said. Hence the idea that things “preach to us.” Of course, the preaching is done in silence, without words. But there is a text before us, nevertheless. The perimeter of the farm marks the limits of the page, and the character of the soil and crops marks the meter of the lines. The farm is a composition, and to exercise his skills in comprehension, the farmer must learn the language of light, water, air, and nutrients. Knowing how to farm is knowing the language that makes the farm realize itself. “The farmer times himself to Nature,” and so learns the rhythms of the weather as the orator changes his tone and pace depending on the audience.²⁴ The resulting text is an effect of interdependent forces: nature may preach to the farmer, but if he doesn’t heed its lesson, there will be no harvest.

Habits of ranking human activity as more or less creative, more or less intellectual, dismay Emerson, if only because the hierarchies miss the more pressing facts of the shared structure that pervades all performance. That is, differences are superficial. “Every occupation, trade, art, transaction, is a compend of the world and a correlative of every other. Each one is an emblem of human life. . . .”²⁵ One can say that the “world is emblematic,” and a “farm is a sacred emblem.”²⁶ Regardless of the intention or the outcome, an “action is the perfection and publication of thought.”²⁷ “People

Therefore is nature glorious with form, color, and motion; that every globe in the remotest heaven, every chemical change from the rudest crystal up to the laws of life, every change of vegetation from the first principle of growth in the eye of a leaf, to the tropical forest and antediluvian coal-mine, every animal function from the sponge up to Hercules, shall hint or thunder to man the laws of right and wrong, and echo the Ten Commandments. Therefore is Nature ever the ally of Religion.” *Ibid.*, 1.40 16.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1.42 3.

²⁴ Emerson, “Farming,” 7.139 10.

²⁵ Emerson, “Compensation,” *Essays, First Series*, 2.101 12; “compend” is an archaic version of “compendium.”

²⁶ Emerson, *Nature*, 1.32 25; *Ibid.*, 1.42 7.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.45 3.

seem not to see that their opinion of the world is also a confession of character.”²⁸ Imbued with such a presupposition, the world becomes a transmogrified arena of signs, and the possibilities for generating interpretation are suddenly, seemingly boundless. “[A]s far as the mechanic or farmer is also a scholar or thinker, his work has no end.”²⁹ That is, his work is of indeterminate duration (it is never finished), and permits indefinite interpretation (it has no conclusion).

The analogy of the farm to nature extends to the farmer and his work in nature. “Is it only poets, and men of leisure and cultivation, who live with [nature]? No; but also hunters, farmers, grooms and butchers, though they express their affection in their choice of life, and not in their choice of words.”³⁰ Which is to say that the farmer’s “life” is a kind of symbol, and we can read that life as we would read the words of the men of leisure and cultivation, of course, aware that Emerson’s double entendre may confirm that it is the farmers who are those with the more admirable type and degree of *cultivation*. The farmer’s life comprises several parts: her labor, nature’s receptivity to that performance, and the crops that are generated as a result of the care taken in this coordination. The technique of baling hay has its finesse, the patterns made by the plow have their design (especially apparent and affecting when seen from an airplane), and the taste of the tomato says as much about the amount of sun allowed upon its skin as about how knowingly its soil was prepared and tended.³¹

The farmer and the farm become the symbols of the second premise of performative inferentialism in so far as they illustrate how performances and interactions—or, as Emerson usefully calls them, “transactions”—are registered in some thing or someone else. Thus, the farmer is parallel to the parent, friend, teacher, soldier, politician, physician, or paramedic, those who care for animals, and of course, those who tend to the protection of the natural environment; the farm is parallel to the child, student, person in need of protection, constituent, injured party, exposed animal, or vulnerable wildlife. In each of these cases, one’s expressive action is often only known in terms of an *influence*. And as Emerson describes the promise contained in the farmer’s labor (e.g., as the influence he has over his field and crop), the same

²⁸ Emerson, “Worship,” *The Conduct of Life*, 6.224–11.

²⁹ Emerson, “Immortality,” 8.341–6.

³⁰ Emerson, “The Poet,” *Essays, Second Series*, 3.15–16. For more on this subject, and its relation to Emerson’s understanding of the poet, see David Justin Hodge, *On Emerson* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003), 77.

³¹ In reply to a possible intellectual contempt for the farmer’s life, Emerson writes: “But the doctrine of the Farm is merely this, that every man ought to stand in primary relation with the work of the world; ought to do it himself, and not to suffer the accident of his having a purse in his pocket, or his having been bred to some dishonorable and injurious craft, to sever him from those duties; and for this reason, that labor is God’s education; that he only is a sincere learner, he only can become a master, who learns the secrets of labor, and who by real cunning extorts from nature its scepter.” “Man the Reformer,” 1.240–26. For more on Emerson and reform, see David Justin Hodge “Reforming Emerson” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy*, vol. XXXVII, no. 4 (Fall 2001): 537–553.

potential can be attributed to the parent or paramedic, where influence—understood as care—is one’s primary labor. Thus, planting a field, teaching a child, or working at a zoological garden make the influenced body (viz., the farm, the student, the animal) legible as the site of some action. Given this, it should be analytic that the influence and the thing influenced can be submitted as legitimate texts for interpretation, and that such reading will minimally allow, and more appropriately, necessitate moral inference. After all, what is a judgment that a child is “raised well” if not a moral inference about parental influence? Similarly, the fruits of the farmer’s hand, an outcome of his labors, stand open for moral evaluation, as when Emerson castigates his Southern slave-holding contemporaries: “The sugar they raised was excellent: nobody tasted the blood in it.”³²

V. The Body Philosophic: Waiting on Sartre

As part of his “essay” on phenomenological ontology, *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre deploys a number of memorable narratives aimed at illustrating rather difficult philosophical theories. One such example, more like a parable, appears during Sartre’s excursus on the vaguely Heideggerian concept of “bad faith.”³³ He asks us to imagine a waiter in a café. The straightforwardness of the scenario belies the difficulty underlying its invocation. Sartre isn’t concerned with what the waiter is doing, but with the waiter’s *consciousness* of what he is doing. Is the waiter “sincere” in his performance of waiting tables, or is he faking it—“play-acting”?³⁴ Sartre states: “If candor or sincerity is a universal value, it is evident that the maxim ‘one must be what one is’ does not serve solely as a regulative principle for judgments and concepts by which I express what I am. It posits not merely an ideal of knowing but an ideal of *being*; it posits to us an absolute conforming of being with itself as a prototype of being.”³⁵ In the context of the ongoing articulation of performative inferentialism, I use Sartre’s example of the waiter as a means of illustrating and accounting for performances that do not leave a material residuum, and of establishing a precedent for assigning significant value to action, regardless of its type, quality, and duration. The waiter brings a glass of water to the table, the patron drinks the water, and the glass is carried away. What is left of the waiter’s performance? And what becomes of the performance if it is repeated a few dozen times in an evening, and then five evenings a week? Is this scene any different than the actor on the stage repeating her lines night after night? In the wake of Sartre’s account, we recognize how one does not wear the role of the waiter

³² Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson’s Antislavery Writings*, ed. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 20.

³³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, tr. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), see esp., ch. 2.

³⁴ “Play-acting” is the title Robert Denoon Cumming gives to the section in *Being and Nothingness* that describes the waiter. See *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. R. D. Cumming (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), viii.

³⁵ Sartre, 59; Sartre’s italics.

like a garment, but rather, one simply *is* the waiter. And when the waiter stands before us, the stakes of his performance feel higher than if they were associated with some casual job. *The performance is a life.*

The waiter at the edge of one's table instructively illustrates the kind of everyday activity that is so overt, so common that it becomes invisible. Sartre writes about something unseen—consciousness—as if it were something we could judge; I turn our attention to something that lies directly before us—the activity of a waiter—as if it is something that we no longer see, or more particularly, aren't quite sure counts as an interpretable phenomenon.

Imagining himself as a waiter, Sartre writes: “Yet there is no doubt that I *am* in a sense a café waiter—otherwise could I not just as well call myself a diplomat or a reporter? But if I am one [i.e., a waiter], this cannot be in the mode of being-in-itself. I am a waiter in the mode of *being what I am not*.”³⁶ Sartre develops this metaphysical distinction a little further by invoking the difference between authentic action and theatrical action:

It is not that I do not wish to be this person or that I want this person to be different. But rather there is no common measure between his being and mine. It is a performance for others and for myself, which means that I can be the waiter only by “acting his part.” But if I so represent myself, I am not he. . . . I cannot be he, I can only play *at being* him; that is, imagine to myself that I am he. . . . I can be the waiter only in the neutralized mode, as the actor is Hamlet, by mechanically making the typical gestures of my state and by aiming myself as an imaginary café waiter through those gestures taken as an analogue.³⁷

Sartre takes it as evident that he must “represent” the waiter, and therefore can do no better than “play *at being* him.” I would prefer to say that such representation—or enacting—is a bona fide performance, but simply credentialed differently than that of the professional waiter. The actor who represents Hamlet is not dismayed that his performance does not make him Hamlet (knowing that such a transformation is impossible), so he aims to make his performance of the character *representative*—that is, worthy of being noted as a fine embodiment of the eponymous literary character. Similarly, if one were to “act like” a waiter, the challenge would be to inhabit the role in such a way that a performance of waiting holds together. It would become convincing as a performance in much the same way that the actor's rendition of Hamlet coalesces as an identifiable aggregate of actions. Indeed, many times an actor is praised for “melting into the role,” or “disappearing into the character.” What else is such fusion but an actor's skill at representing his character? The same obtains for Sartre moonlighting as a waiter: when embodying the role, what Sartre takes to be imitation becomes something else entirely—an authentic act.

³⁶ Sartre, 60; Sartre's italics.

³⁷ *Ibid.* Sartre's italics.

Sartre assesses some prevailing cultural attitudes toward various working class professions. Concerning “tradesmen,” he writes: “Their condition is wholly one of ceremony. The public demands of them that they realize it as a ceremony; there is the dance of the grocer, of the tailor, of the auctioneer, by which they endeavor to persuade their clientele that they are nothing but a grocer, an auctioneer, a tailor. A grocer who dreams is offensive to the buyer, because such a grocer is not wholly a grocer.”³⁸ Sartre laments that those who use the services of the grocer, the tailor, the auctioneer fail to register the way these types of work may be authentic and meaningful. The public, according to Sartre, condescends to the trades and service industries by presuming that its workers don’t want to do their work, or don’t wish to be associated with it. The condescension, furthermore, reflects a dangerous inference about the status of such work: public opinion would disqualify a whole realm of human expression and experience, making it seem inferior, infelicitous, and incapable of satisfying the agent of action. Of course, in France, the waiter is a revered figure, criticism of whom Sartre may be at pains to defend—in a way that an American might defend the farmer. Just as Emerson was suspicious of the hierarchies that privilege the cultivation of ideas instead of the cultivation of land, I emphasize here Sartre’s critique of the public’s unflattering supposition that tradesmen perform a “ceremony,” and for that are always deprived the chance to claim an identity relation with their work; that is, for example, to be oneself by being a waiter.

By now it should be clear that Sartre’s reflections provide a steady and unequivocally for the idea of taking embodied human performances as readable texts. Evincing the fact that the waiter’s behavior can be read is significant in the line of thinking that allows nonreproductive human action to be included in an inferential system. By nonreproductive, I do not mean *un*productive. Rather, I mean any performance that does not yield a material artifact, and cannot be repeated (i.e., one can repeat an initial action, but it will always be an action after the first instance; thus, repetition is a sequencing of versions of the “same” thing). Thus, the courier, butler, window washer, janitor, sanitation worker, athlete, bus driver, performance artist, and theatre actor would qualify as nonreproductive performers. Peggy Phelan accounts for the immaterial, nonrepeated effect of performance in the same way: “Performance in a strict sense is nonreproductive. . . . Performance implicates the real through the presence of living bodies.”³⁹ A play is reinvigorated—reanimated—every time it is performed; different actors, different historical contexts, new works by others allow the performance to continually come in for new critique, to be assessed anew for the nature and meaning of its nonreproductive acts. This gets to the core of the third premise of performative inferentialism: that the human body and its performances are relevant and readable texts. This is the case in spite of the fact that such performances are by definition transient, fulfilled in a moment of presence, and exceed any attempt to docu-

³⁸ Sartre, 59.

³⁹ Peggy Phelan, “The Ontology of Performance,” *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 148.

ment or fix them. But the nonreproductive performance, despite its fleeting nature, is still a munificent site of inference and interpretation. What else is the gratuity inscribed on the dinner bill but a quantified appraisal of the waiter's embodied performance? This number stands at the intersection between the waiter's action and the patron's interpretation of the waiter's action. A tip is a judgment.

At the end of the first chapter of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (in a chapter entitled "Performance"), Erving Goffman cites Sartre's waiter as a paradigmatic dramatization of the kind of inferential activity we do everyday with immaterial and nonreproductive performances:

A status, a position, a social place is not a material thing, to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well articulated. Performed with ease or clumsiness, awareness or not, guile or good faith, it is none the less something that must be enacted and portrayed, something that must be realized.⁴⁰

Immediately following this statement, Goffman quotes, at length, from Sartre's testimony about the waiter. As early as the second paragraph of Goffman's book, however, in the Introduction, he identifies what he calls "carriers" or "sign-vehicles" that "become available for conveying information."⁴¹ The point being that, as readers of performance ("observers") we "can glean clues from [the agent's] conduct and appearance," which in turn become the ground of inferences. A couple of pages later, Goffman quotes from William I. Thomas, who states: "We live by inference."⁴² I take this to mean we *rely* upon inference to navigate sundry performative grammars, each grammar demanding familiarity with the criteria that define the performance it conscribes. Those who exercise such familiarity we often deem reliable, and for that reason turn to them for assurance about our own inferential estimations; usually we call these people critics.⁴³

Once we are alerted to the possibility of making inferences about nonreproductive performances, and assigning ethical significance to them, there is no risk of seeming moralistic. The claim that "the waiter was bad" should be understood to mean "the waiter performed poorly"; yet ordinary language may obscure such a distinction. Judging the poverty of the performance is an evaluation of some quality, or its lack, usually a quality that is grounded in a context and supported by a complex set of norms. The reason one can make an inference about the waiter's performance, for good or ill, and thus render a critical remark on that performance *as a text*, stems from the fact that the criteria for waiting are fairly well-established, if not also well-known

⁴⁰ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 75.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴³ For more on reliabilism, see Brandom's Introduction to *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); see also the third chapter: "Insights and Blindspots of Reliabilism."

and well-instituted. If one lives in a community where waiting is given low priority and stunted value, both by waiters and patrons, it may be understandable that waiting doesn't appear to be a promising vocation for the expression of human identity—unlike it is for the French, for example. But if the wider interpretive possibilities of waiting performances are explored, innovations may arise, new standards may be adopted, and the profession could undergo a shift both in esteem and criteria. The limits of such work are set by the waiters, and to some extent by the patrons; they interactively learn the possible and its value through engagement. But it is the waiter, as an individual agent of the trade, who must decide how the waiting performance is going to unfold as a nonreproductive act; this is innovative, artistic work. If the consequences of such a decision cannot be submitted to our view as readable texts, the waiter is denied any incentive for experimentation, for believing that his action could be representative of personal identity, or for achieving his labor as a form of art.

VI. The Ethics of Performance

If in the foregoing sections I aimed at establishing three aspects or premises of performative inferentialism (for convenience now quickly repeated: (1) that the emergence of a material residuum from a performance ought to be regarded as a genuine sight of textual interpretation, and that the work, whatever its formal qualities, should be sufficient for making its own claims, and advancing its own argument (2) that performances and interactions—or, as Emerson usefully calls them, “transactions”—are registered in some thing or someone else and (3) that the human body and its performances are relevant and readable texts), in this concluding section, I defend the idea that this theory of reading is continuous with a moral enterprise—namely, that that such reading involves a semiotic ethics. Performance, as a term of action, appears always to connote a moral dimension—in the sense that human action itself is ineluctably coextensive with the demand that we assess its nature and value. On this view any instance of human performance—linguistic, material, or kinesthetic—signals both the ethical quality of the act and necessarily invites ethical judgment of its parameters and implications.

For these reasons, among others, the concept of the self is significantly altered by performative inferentialism. Historically, the self has been taken to mean a natural, essential given—not unlike a soul; in such cases, the self is understood as an ontologically coherent unity, immune to the perturbations of mortal existence. Plato held this view. The empiricists, foremost among them Hume, averted this notion by saying the self is made *post hoc*, not given; it is an assimilation of cultural and idiosyncratic impressions, not a divine assertion; it is a collection of perceptions, not an *a priori* substance. At present neither extreme position—Platonic or Humean—holds a spot of defensible philosophical priority. One contribution of performative inferentialism is the habilitation of a third option for defining the self, namely, to regard the self as the aggregate of one's performances.

At first blush this may sound constructivist or Humean, but it is only partially so. With performative inferentialism, we shift the standard of judgment from a neutral to a value-based position. The self is only nominally unified, whether defined ontologically as a homunculus or empirically in terms of perceptions; that is, we ascribe negative rights to an abstract self (thereby protecting it against unjustified invasion, distress, or injury). But to speak of the self in terms of positive rights, the ontological basis is no longer compelling, if only because it begs the question of desert. And the constructivist argument merely handles the accretion of perceptions without setting out a value for them. With performative inferentialism, by contrast, the crucial domain of positive rights is placed on a value-laden foundation. The self is, from this view, an ethically rich subject that is at the same time an aesthetically compelling object. The moral act can be taken as an aesthetic act, and both can be regarded as constitutive of the self who performs it. The moral and aesthetic are then aspects of the *same* performance.⁴⁴

The moral aspect has to do with taking responsibility for one's performance and submitting it to the interpretation of a community of readers and agents. But performative inferentialism is not a moral theory that establishes or forces a binary right/wrong or a good/bad evaluative mechanism when emphasizing the moral dimension of human action. The emphasis is on taking responsibility for one's performances, and making those performances relevant to the affirmation of inferential commitments that can be reasonably defended by those performances. The aesthetic aspect has to do with taking seriously that one's performance can be appreciated as a resource for creativity, innovation, and the exploration of human action. Since I am my performances, it matters how I regard them, it matters that I take them as the ground of my constitution, and it matters that I respect the inferences that may be drawn from them by others.

Given the bivalence of the moral and the aesthetic in the reading practices articulated above, the need for describing performative inferentialism as a 'semiotic ethics' should become more evident, informative, and justified. We are used to regarding *acts* as possessing moral content (from a handshake to an upper-cut), since acts, in the context of their performance, regularly reveal insights about their ethical status. How-

⁴⁴ I draw the term "aspect," and its inflection here, from Ludwig Wittgenstein, Part II, section xi, of the *Philosophical Investigations* and use it somewhat technically to refer to a shifting or alternating perception of a singular object or performance. In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein reproduces Jastrow's drawing of a so-called "duck-rabbit," and there notes how the duck appears as one aspect and the rabbit as another aspect of the same image; those readers/viewers who are not "aspect-blind" can see, in alternation, two distinct aspects of the same object or line. See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 194. See also *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew: New Essays on Aspect-Seeing*, ed. William Day and Victor Krebs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For a consideration of the possibility—and implications—of seeing two aspects simultaneously or contemporaneously see David LaRocca, "The False Pretender: Deleuze, Sherman, and the Status of Simulacra," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 69, no. 3 (Summer 2011), 321-29.

ever, we are less used to treating *signs*—perhaps especially nonverbal performances, nonreproductive acts, and kinesthetic signs—as rich fields of moral content. Hence the attention given to the farmer, waiter, and the action painter—all of them performances that can be read as signs-in-action (that is, as bodies or agents) and the creators of signs (e.g., farms, paintings, etc.). What is more, the semiology of these performance can (and one is tempted to say here, should) be read with an emphasis on the local ethical knowledge and values that there obtain. But fundamentally the inferentialism that performance invites also implicates the reader in the exercise of a semiotic ethics—namely, that every act read and every act of reading are informed and defined by value-laden inheritances. Postulating and sketching performative inferentialism as a semiotic ethics is not done stridently much less comprehensively or conclusively—rather the investigation and the claims for it are made speculatively in the service of enriching the discourse about how reading gets done, what warrants reading, and what we can fathom about the meaning of those interpretative engagements.

That performative inferentialism as a semiotic ethics has some traction as an intellectual notion worth developing has been suggested, by among other things, a reader of the present article pointing me to field-defining work in ethnomethodology by Harold Garfinkel. I have discovered that the orientation of Garfinkel’s research, perhaps most usefully and concisely expressed in “Respecification . . . an announcement of studies,” bears marks of resemblance to performative inferentialism.⁴⁵ My own initial efforts to familiarize myself with Garfinkel’s seminal work have been gratifying: first for moments of recognized correspondence of interest and approach, and secondly for the promise of further research into the ways these lines of inquiry might complement one another. As just one indication of the promise of such comparative research, consider Garfinkel’s highly expansive sense of the content relevant to sociological and ethnomethodological investigation:

For ethnomethodology the objective reality of social facts, in that, and just how, it is every society’s locally, endogenously produced, naturally organised, reflexively accountable, ongoing, practical achievement, being everywhere, always, only, exactly and entirely, members’ work, with no time out, and with no possibility of evasion, hiding out, passing, postponement, or buy-outs, is *thereby* sociology’s fundamental phenomenon.⁴⁶

Garfinkel’s breathless cataloguing of sites of interpretative responsibility seems a fitting analogue to the work of performative inferentialism, especially in so far as Garfinkel reminds a community not just of the range of interpretable texts and acts, but the moral complication of avoiding or neglecting such work. Importantly though, a

⁴⁵ Harold Garfinkel, “Respecification: evidence for locally produced, naturally accountable phenomena of order, logic, reason, meaning, methods, etc. in and as of the essential haecceity of immortal ordinary society, (I)—an announcement of studies,” *Ethnomethodology and the human sciences*, ed. Graham Button (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 10-19.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

semiotic ethics does not entail that one's interpretation of a performance (e.g., a non-verbal act) necessarily implies a judgment of the *moral worth* of the performance, but rather that performances in general—as a type or class—are expected to possess ethical content (within the spectrum of gradations such content would be expected to have—from agitated to inert); hence the relevance of Garfinkel's injunction that there are no time outs, hide outs, or buy-outs. A semiotic ethics, then, does not seek to identify which performances are (morally) good—as opposed to aesthetically good—but aims to create a space in which the presumption of ethical content in performance—of whatever sort—is part of one's critical deliberation on the meaning and significance of the act. The motivating interest, then, is not for moralizing but rather for exploring the criteria by which we describe the ethical content—or effects—of phenomena.

As we find lines of affiliation with semiotic ethics in Garfinkel's ethnomethodology, so there are points of resemblance in Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Alan Read's *Theatre and Everyday Life: An Ethics of Performance*, and Miguel Tamen's *Friends of Interpretable Objects*.⁴⁷ With these works in mind, we may consider how a semiotic ethics transforms our relationship to ordinary acts and texts that are regularly dismissed as impertinent to moral philosophy, as well as to performative works of art that are sometimes discredited for being political or propagandistic because they appear to have (announce, invite, or betray) an ethical viewpoint. Art that is, or risks being, politicized intimates one of our first clues that performative works and acts possess moral relevance, though often latently, in unseen or unacknowledged ways. It is perhaps those established, canonical works of art that appear to stand apart as morally neutral that we must be most careful not to neglect, since they may conceal ethical prerogatives we too quickly assumed they could not possibly contain, or we would not want them to contain. A semiotic ethics, then, will require a community or perhaps a "society of friends," in Tamen's Quaker-inflected phrase, to treat performances as the site of ethical interpretation. There are, as Tamen says, "groups of people for whom certain objects count as interpretable and who, accordingly, deal with certain objects in recognizable ways."⁴⁸ Replace 'objects' with 'acts' or 'performances' and the sentiment aligns with semiotic ethics. Its practitioners might be described as "friends of performative acts"—a community that recognizes the potential for claims on moral knowledge deriving from actions, kinesthetics, and other forms of nonverbal communication.

While the brief engagement with Garfinkel's "Respecification" is one of many promising moments of potential cross-fertilization between performative inferentialism and ethnomethodology, I wish to turn now, or turn back, to what might be

⁴⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, tr. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). Alan Read, *Theatre and Everyday Life: An Ethics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993). Miguel Tamen, *Friends of Interpretable Objects* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁴⁸ Tamen, 3.

called the constitutive grammar of semiotic ethics—ideas that help readers become conscious of the structure of performative expressions. Working analogically from examples in the philosophy of language, there is reason to take seriously the ways in which modes of linguistic inferentialism parallel the kind of semiotics that can meaningfully read—and attribute moral as well as aesthetic content to—nonverbal performances.

Some years ago, in *Making It Explicit*, philosopher Robert Brandom set out a rigorous theory of how the semantic content of a sentence is restricted by the inferences that are generated out of it or applied to it.⁴⁹ More recently in *Articulating Reasons* he adduced some of the hallmarks of the brand of inferentialism that he finds most appealing. While those elements, which come under the title of “linguistic pragmatism,” outline a competing model of semantic inference, there remain a number of propositions that can be profitably held in common with performative inferentialism. Before enumerating my reservations, I will outline what of Brandom’s linguistic pragmatism aligns with my proposed theory.

Brandom states—with his emphases preserved—that “what distinguishes specifically *discursive* practices from the doings of non-concept using creatures is their *inferential* articulation.”⁵⁰ This rationalist pragmatism, as Brandom calls it, “understands *expressing* something, making it *explicit*, as putting it in a form in which it can both serve as and stand in need of *reasons*: a form in which it can serve as both premise and conclusion in *inferences*.”⁵¹ In sections III, IV, and V above, I tried to make just these sorts of judgments possible with respect to a diversity and range of texts (e.g., painting/painter, farming/farmer, and waiting/waiter). And like Brandom, I did this with the idea that if bodies, texts, and performances were given equivalent, or appropriately defined or delimited, inferential status to conventional texts (such as books), then it would only be a short step to the development of a moral dimension for our related acts of reading them; this equivalency would not confer equal value per se but legitimacy as a site of interpretation. Brandom uses words familiar to my argument, and poignantly consolidates the areas where our theories stand in agreement, again with his italics retained:

Saying or thinking *that* things are thus-and-so is undertaking a distinctive kind of *inferentially* articulated commitment: putting it forward as a fit premise for further inferences, that is, *authorizing* its use as such a premise, and undertaking *responsibility* to entitle oneself to that commitment, to vindicate one’s authority. . . .⁵²

This is an inflection of my ongoing effort to confirm that creation and interpretation are ethically weighted enterprises; where, for example, the artist, the work of art, the

⁴⁹ Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁵⁰ Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, 10-11.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵² *Ibid.*

art critic are present in a context that makes each of its dimensions susceptible to inferences—including *moral* inferences.

Even with a system that can withstand admitting a variety of texts, Brandom retains the traditional boundary of the linguistic, or conceptual. For him, only a linguistic or discursive practice “accords some performances the force or significance of *claimings*, of *propositionally* contentful commitments, which can both serve as and stand in need of reasons.”⁵³ This is a dire, rather unpropitious assessment. Under Brandom’s schema every example I have presented is disqualified from achieving “propositionally contentful commitments,” which is just to say: they cannot make a “rational” claim upon us, and therefore do not align with the standards of explicitly *linguistic* performances. This means that I can write an essay, such as the present work, accounting for the claims made by a painter’s, a farmer’s, or a waiter’s performances (since my claims are inscribed linguistically), but cannot expect anything like this explicitness, or inferential availability, from the actual painting, farm, or embodied acts of waiting—and thus can make no informed judgments and “propositionally contentful commitments” concerning the actions of the painter, farmer, or waiter. From Brandom’s view, if the waiter wants to put his performance up for rational scrutiny, he will first have to offer a linguistic, cognitively discursive report of his action.

One way of mitigating Brandom’s gravely constraining sense of what can make a claim for legitimate interpretation is to refigure the placement of the “linguistic” in an interpretive matrix. Earlier, when addressing body language, I emphasized the analogical quality that makes bodily motion and gesture appear as a “language.” Social etiquette makes this apparent: for those who care, a breach of manners is equivalent to the vocalization of an offensive expletive. The error is “read” in the body’s action, as a spoken epithet is heard, and an inference is made. In *The Age of Innocence* Edith Wharton depicts instances of nonliteral, unspoken yet nevertheless semiotically explicit (and troubling) signs, for example, how Madame Olenska’s ignorance of New York’s high society cues leaves her—and those who would associate with her—in disrepute. Yet where Brandom places the linguistic at the center of his theory, and blocks the nonlinguistic from the field of his inquiry, I would rather see the linguistic as a *portion* of a larger network of semiologies. Sanctioning other ways of reading makes possible “propositionally contentful commitments” for nonlinguistic performances. It is not that the claims such performances make will be linguistic; rather, that the performances will make claims in accord with the grammar of their respective semiology. The criteria for such expression can only be expounded when the given text is made a legitimate site for issuing claims and receiving inferences.

It is important to contend with putatively linguistic theories of reading, such as Brandom’s, if only to show that performative inferentialism does not upset such systems, but rather relies on them, complements them, and adds new dimensions to their already substantive formulations. But these new domains, however, do not so much bespeak a theoretical innovation as a theoretical *recovery*. The ideas that motivate my

⁵³ Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, 14.

investigation—and its recommendations—are not new, and hardly novel. Performative inferentialism is, I would say, the heir of ancient Greek and Roman rhetoric, especially in the work of Aristotle and Stoic philosophers, such as Cicero, Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius. For them, it was a given that argument is moral activity. Rhetoric, which is primarily an art of persuasion, was understood as fundamentally an art of human conduct—where one’s life becomes an argument and an instantiation for a way of thinking. Living well is not the goal of thinking, but its prerequisite. Far from slighting the position of the author, Aristotle and Cicero, et al., foreground it, to the point where the written/spoken divide is secondary to the quality of the self writing or speaking.

It is not so much in his *Nicomachean Ethics* or *Politics*, but in his *Rhetoric* that we find Aristotle’s dedication to the idea that the human body is a legitimate site of interpretation, especially moral and rational inference. When giving a speech, Aristotle recommends:

The narration should depict character; to which end you must know what makes it do so. One such thing is the indication of moral purpose; the quality of purpose indicated determines the quality of character depicted and is itself determined by the end pursued.⁵⁴

Aristotle’s view underscores why the so-called genetic fallacy and the *ad hominem* attack are themselves fallacies. (An *ad hominem* is a ploy to shift attention from the argument to the arguer; and, committing a genetic fallacy entails “confusing the causal origins of a belief with its justification.”⁵⁵) For Aristotle, though, the origin of action and the present performance of action *are* pertinent to rational discourse, and therefore may be justifiably appealed to in the process of mounting an argument and articulating reasons in its defense. The author is relevant to what she says because of the authority of her person; in this respect the authority of words is coextensive with the act of authorship. Given this scenario of binding relation between author and text, speaker and speech, conduct and the ethical weight of one’s pronouncements, it is no longer surprising that this moral moment should appear in Aristotle’s book on rhetoric, since, for him the way in which one presents an argument is not much different from the way one presents one’s embodied self (a self by definition possessed of moral worth and positioned for ethical conduct). For example, the speaker himself—his history, his person, his mode of presentation—is an argument. We might consider analogically how not just the sentences one speaks but the manner of that speech as well as the somatic conditions of their expression constitute propositions in an ongoing, evolving syllogistic account—what can be more briefly described as a performance (a linguistic performance, for example, or for ordinary language philosophers,

⁵⁴ Aristotle, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1443-4.

⁵⁵ *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 306.

a performance of speech—in their parlance, a speech act). Quite importantly for Aristotle, the nature of the speaker’s presence is crucial to the success of the speech, and the argument it contains. He commends: “Do not let your words seem inspired so much by intelligence, in the manner now current, as by moral purpose.”⁵⁶ And a bit later: “. . . [A]fter all, it is more fitting for a good man to display himself as an honest fellow than as a subtle reasoner.”⁵⁷ With words such as “seemed” and “display,” it may appear that Aristotle is arguing for dissimulation, e.g., where a “subtle reasoner” would try to mask his intelligence to gain the affection of his audience. If this were so, then the orator would be, as Sartre would be if he tried to wait tables, “play-acting” as an orator.⁵⁸ Aristotle’s point is quite contrary to this: the orator ought not be fooled by the (otherwise sensible, or at least customary) idea that his *words* are the only thing that matter to his speech. It is, rather, what stands behind his speech (e.g., his moral purpose) and what stands before the audience (e.g., his person, his manner) that complement and reinforce what is said.

In *The Divisions of Oratory*, Cicero states that “inference is based entirely on probabilities and on the essential characteristics of things.”⁵⁹ And one arrives “. . . at an inference from each [part of an argument] in turn with reference to the matter that will be under consideration.”⁶⁰ This sounds definitively linguistic in nature, but the “things” Cicero refers to are often not words or concepts, but the spectrum of nonlinguistic performances that present themselves as the conditions for inference:

There is also another kind of argument that is taken from the mere indications of an action, for instance a weapon, blood, a cry, a stumble, change of colour, stammering, trembling, or anything else that can be perceived by the senses: also some sign of preparation or of communication with somebody, or something seen or heard or hinted later on.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Aristotle, 1444.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 1447.

⁵⁸ Cumming, ed., *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, viii.

⁵⁹ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *The Divisions of Oratory*, vol. IV, Loeb Library, no. 349 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 339. It is worth noting how probabilities are connected with reliabilism. One’s talent for making inferences amounts to a sense of probability, for example, how likely it is—given the conditions—that one’s inference will achieve the reliable interpretation one intended or sought to provide. Reliabilism, then, is a way of speaking of a theory that addresses reliable inferences. Brandom puts it this way: “Reliabilism deserves to be called a form of epistemological *externalism*, because assessments of reliability (and hence of knowledge) can turn on considerations external to the reasons possessed by the candidate knower himself. . . . Reliabilism points to the fundamental *social* or *interpersonal* articulation of the practices of reason giving and reason assessing within which questions of who has knowledge arise.” Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, 120.

⁶⁰ Cicero, 341.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Pointing out *who* is speaking is not considered an *ad hominem* attack for Aristotle and Cicero, nor is it a genetic fallacy to emphasize origins as part of a defense of values.⁶² For the Aristotelian and Stoical doctrines, which I see as coincident with the fundamental offering of performative inferentialism, the human body and its performances are not treated as liabilities to the exercise of rational inference, but as potentially indispensable resources for the best expression of moral propositions, both in terms of claiming them (as in making judgments) and abiding by them (as in deducing precepts).

The work drawn from Rosenberg, Kaprow, Emerson, Sartre, Goffman, Garfinkel, Brandom, Aristotle, and Cicero solicits a question, with which I shall conclude: Does the merit, and promise, of performative inferentialism rest on one's definition of the real? Plato's resistance to semiological diversity, including his diminution of poetry, indicates his unwillingness to admit any humanly embodied or earthly presence as capable of sustaining the burden of the real, much less of being it. In our age, when critical perception can seem at once informed by and ignorant of its Platonism, when the Real seems terminally distant and deferred, performative inferentialism advances a doctrine of radical value for immanent, mortal experience; as with ethnomethodology, nothing is immune from interpretation because everything generates respect as a possible site of inference. The reasons presented to defend these claims, as well as the spirit of this investigation, should confer the impression that performance, at last, participates in the Real, and as such, should have a theory that supports such a conviction.



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⁶² Brian Leiter has addressed the genetic fallacy with respect to Nietzsche's writing and his theoretical project: "Nietzsche, the author of a famed genealogy of morality, was sensitive to this fallacy [i.e., the genetic fallacy]. 'The inquiry into the origin of our evaluations,' he writes in his notebooks, 'is in absolutely no way identical with a critique of them. . . .' But, he adds, discovering the 'shameful origin' does bring about 'a feeling of diminution in value of the thing that originated thus and prepares the way to a critical mood and attitude toward it.' Learning that beliefs were arrived at the wrong way doesn't show them to be false, but it does make us wonder anew about whether they deserve our credence." Brian Leiter, "The Fate of Genius," *The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 5194 (October 18, 2002), 13.