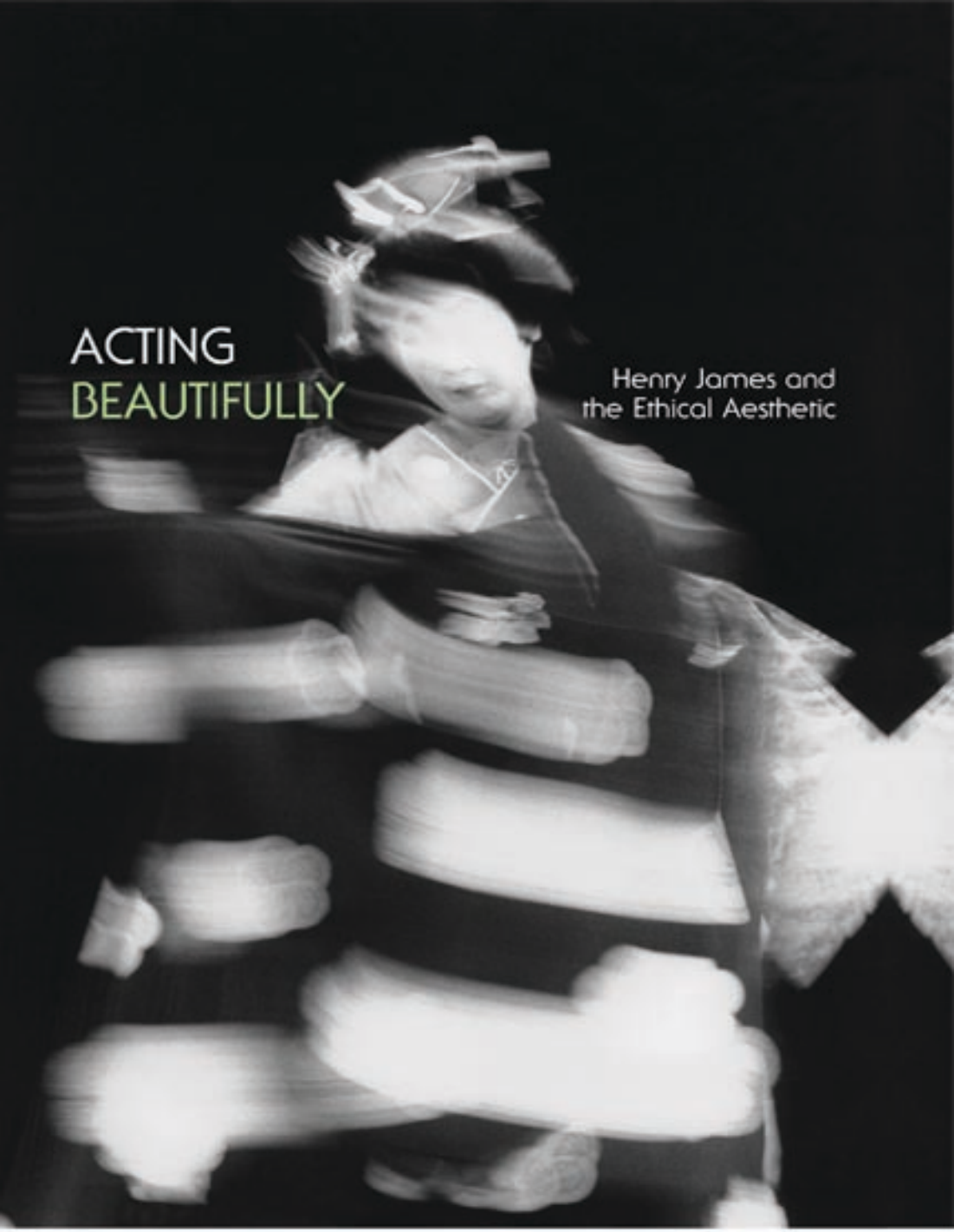

ACTING BEAUTIFULLY

Henry James and the Ethical Aesthetic

SIGI JÖTTKANDT

Acting Beautifully

SUNY series in Psychoanalysis and Culture

Henry Sussman, editor

Acting Beautifully

Henry James and the Ethical Aesthetic

Sigi Jöttkandt

State University of New York Press

Cover design by Bernd Uhlig

Uitgegeven met steun van de Universitaire Stichting van België

Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany

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Printed in the United States of America

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For information, address State University of New York Press,
194 Washington Avenue, Suite 305, Albany, NY 12210-2384

Production by Michael Haggett
Marketing by Anne M. Valentine

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jottkandt, Sigi, 1965–
Acting beautifully : Henry James and the ethical aesthetic / Sigi Jottkandt.
p. cm. — (SUNY series in psychoanalysis and culture)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-7914-6557-8 (hc : acid-free paper)
1. James, Henry, 1843–1916—Criticism and interpretation. 2. Didactic fiction, American—History and criticism. 3. James, Henry, 1843–1916—Aesthetics. 4. James, Henry, 1843–1916—Ethics. 5. Conduct of life in literature. 6. Ethics in literature. I. Title. II. Series.

PS2124.J87 2005
813'.4—dc22

2004060828

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my mothers

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Preface

It occurs to me that my title may seem a little misleading once one realizes that my subject implicitly deals at least as much with Lacan as it does with James. My decision to leave Lacan out, however, comes not so much out of a furtive desire to deceive the reader as from an intent to emphasize how the psychoanalytic concepts I will be dealing with here make their appearance primarily in and through the terms by which they appear in the novels and short stories of Henry James. The non-Lacanian reader can immediately breathe more easily, knowing that in what follows very little direct reference will be made to Lacanian psychoanalysis, with its notoriously difficult formulations, and such a reader may well be advised to skip this Preface altogether and begin with the James. However, given their deliberate "burial" within the main body of the text, I thought it might be worthwhile to outline briefly the psychoanalytic concepts explored in this discussion of three acts in Henry James.

First to be explained is the concept of the act in Lacan. In simplest terms, an act is an ethical action: an action made in accordance with the ethical demand placed on us by an encounter with what Lacan calls the Real. Here the act is to be distinguished from another Lacanian concept, the *passage à l'acte*, which occurs when the subject, confronted with a certain impasse within its fantasmatic structure, "jumps" out of its sustaining fantasy. Although, depending on its circumstances, the *passage à l'acte* may also on occasion constitute an ethical act, the act as I am using the term has a broader scope and, as we will see in what follows, can take a variety of different forms. What primarily differentiates the act from the *passage à l'acte* is the fundamental transformation of the subject's subjective structure that an act entails. Where the *passage à l'acte* remains tied to some extent to the fantasmatic scenario sustained by the Other's desire, the act occasions the total reorganization of the relation between the subject and the Other that Lacan calls traversing the fantasy.[1]

The ethical act, then, amounts to a creative solution to the problem of how to give phenomenal expression to something within our representational system that can have no phenomenal form known, in Lacanese, as the Real. Ethics, for Lacan, revolves around how we manage to remain faithful to this representational impossibility that lies at the heart of our experience, whether our fidelity is expressed through various Symbolic mediations, as I explore them in the first two chapters, or, as we will see in the final chapter, through a direct, that is, unmediated relation to the Real itself—as impossible and paradoxical as that may sound. The first option describes an ethics based around the desiring formations, representing primarily an ethics of the Symbolic as detailed in Lacan's seminar on *Ethics*, while the second represents an ethics established on the Real of the drives as elaborated in the later *Encore* Seminar of 1972–1973. But although this narrative trajectory might therefore imply a teleology to Lacan's ethical thought, as it is sometimes, and I think a little misleadingly, held—that is, as representing a positively valorized ethical shift from desire to drive—it is important to remember, as we will see in greater detail in the final chapter, that these two ethical modalities represent simply the two contrary yet commensurately ethical outcomes of the primordial, foundational choice that first delivered us into our subjective condition as sexed beings.[2]

The main intent of this work is to allow Henry James to *symptomatize*, that is, to give some form of body to these two aspects of Lacanian ethics. But in the process, as it should be clear from this formulation, what James additionally contributes to the psychoanalytic discussion is to confirm the inseparability of aesthetics from Lacanian ethics. Filtering the Lacanian concepts through James helps to bring to light a certain submerged aesthetic narrative present in the psychoanalytic invocation of the ethical act. My feeling is that this fundamentally *aesthetic* dimension of psychoanalytic ethical subjectivity is largely being overlooked in the recent drive to identify a Cartesian origin for the Lacanian subject as the subject of science.[3] This book is an attempt to rectify this. Here I identify and advance a specifically ethical role for the aesthetic as I see it indicated in psychoanalytic discourse.

Accordingly, in the following I present three acts by three heroines in James that I determine to be ethical in the Lacanian senses. Each of the three acts I outline has this one thing in common: they separately represent a singular expression of fidelity to the impossibility encountered in the realm of experience that fundamentally transforms not only the characters'

own subjective constitutions but also that of the world in which they live. In every case, we will see how the James heroine explicitly calls on the aesthetic in order to perform her act. When, at the end of *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel chooses to return to Osmond; when similarly, in *The Wings of the Dove*, Milly sacrifices her life to prevent knowledge of Kate and Densher's engagement from getting out; and when, in the short story "The Altar of the Dead," James's unnamed woman first categorically insists on and then reverses her demand that Stransom light the missing candle for Hague, each performs an aesthetic feat that meets the conditions of the Lacanian ethical act. Let us look briefly at the material covered.

The first chapter addresses the foundational psychoanalytic narrative of subject-formation that Freud called the *Neurosenwahl*, the "choice of neurosis." This idea involves the paradoxical notion that as subjects we primordially chose the way we desire. Ethics, for both Freud and Lacan, revolves around the way this original choice is attested to in our lives: how we take responsibility for it and remain faithful to it. What makes this idea paradoxical of course is the fact that this first, original choice can never be represented within our spatial-temporal, or as Kant would say, phenomenal system. We can never point to any specific moment in time when we made this choice, but, as Kierkegaard observes in his discussion of a similar idea in *Either/Or*, the fact that we have the possibility of making any choices at all attests to the fact of this choice as having already been made. As Kierkegaard puts it: "the original choice is forever present in every succeeding choice."[4] What Kierkegaard makes clear with this remark is the way every ethical choice represents a simultaneous fidelity to the original choice through which all succeeding choices first became available to us. While Freud tropes this original decision in terms of *Ur-Verdrängung*, primary repression, in James's *The Portrait of a Lady* it takes the form of what Lacan calls a "forced choice."

Isabel's controversial decision to return to Osmond at the end of the novel has long vexed critics. But the specifically ethical dimensions of this choice become evident once we understand it as occurring within a very similar structure to that of the *Neurosenwahl*. While many critics continue to read the novel through the peripatetic narrative structure of the *Bildungsroman*, in my first chapter I show how the logic and ethics of Isabel's final decision begins to make sense only once we understand it through the psychoanalytic concept of repetition. When Isabel returns to Osmond, I submit, she acts not out of any of the pathological considerations variously proposed by critics of this novel but, rather, simply according to the moral

law that for Kant gives us practical knowledge of our noumenal freedom. As such, her act entails the paradoxical attempt to phenomenalize something that is strictly speaking impossible to represent: the Idea of free causality. Because, as an Idea of reason, free causality cannot be represented—and because, I argue, James, like Kant, rejects the Schillerian aesthetic solution represented in the novel by Osmond and, more generally, in the narrative structure of the *Bildungsroman* itself—the only means available to Isabel for representing this impossibility is through the *aegis* of a repetition: the repetition through which, in choosing Osmond again, Isabel testifies and maintains her fidelity to the original freedom with which she first chose to choose.

Through a transposition of the psychoanalytic terminology into the philosophical dialectic of freedom and determination, James's novel helps us to see what is really at stake in the psychoanalytic narrative of ethical subjectivity, namely, the radical philosophical, ethical, and political potential of transcendental freedom. But, significantly, what James additionally draws attention to in the psychoanalytic narrative is the peculiarly *aesthetic* nature of the psychoanalytical ethical act. Returning to Osmond, Isabel's ethical choice is shown to be the practical expression—the putting into action—of her habitual mode of aesthetic perception, troped in the novel as synecdoche: Isabel's persistent error of taking the part for the whole. This is a mode of perception that bears striking similarities to how Kant describes the aesthetic or reflective judgment, which similarly manages to generate a conceptual whole out of a particular intuition. Hence what James helps us to identify in *The Portrait of a Lady* are certain formal parallels between the Lacanian ethical and Kantian aesthetic judgments, both of which originate from and defend the incompleteness of our knowledge, troped by psychoanalysis as the unconscious.

It will quickly become clear that the concept of the aesthetic I am elaborating here is markedly different from its traditional reconciliatory modulation, long critiqued by Paul De Man as a dubious and ethically suspect means for reconciling the two irreparably divided realms of nature and freedom (or, in De Man's terms, a phenomenal and a linguistic consciousness). In this account, the aesthetic serves rather a different function, namely, that of preventing such a synthesis from ever occurring. In the second chapter, on *The Wings of the Dove*, I develop this obstructive, inhibiting quality that I retrieve from Kant's account of beauty to argue that in this novel the aesthetic acts as a form of protection against the threat of total symbolic determination posed to Milly Theale by her

apotheosis. Here, the earlier questions of freedom and determination become transposed into the linguistic and representational concerns that haunt the psychoanalytic discourse of hysteria. I suggest that by understanding Milly's illness as an hysterical episode, we are better placed to comprehend what I see as the specifically ethical dimension of her final, aesthetic death in Venice. James's contribution to the psychoanalytic perspective is thus not simply to highlight the aesthetic dimensions of hysteria but, more crucially, to help us to reappraise the centrality of beauty in the psychoanalytic ethics of desire. Freud of course gestures toward the aesthetic character of the hysterical neurosis in *Totem and Taboo* where he observes how hysteria might be thought of as "a caricature of a work of art," while in his famous account of the Sophocles' play, Lacan explicitly names Antigone's beauty as constituting a protective barrier against the destruction known in his later work as the Real.[5] It is James, however, who provides the most tangible presentation the aesthetic's ethical province.

My aims in this second chapter, then, are twofold. First, I show how Milly's hysterical solution represents an answer to the problem of representation, long noted by James critics as one of the central concerns of *The Wings of the Dove*. Somewhat differently from most clinical psychoanalytic perspectives perhaps, here I argue that hysteria *itself* constitutes an ethical stance with regard to the unrepresentable, with important implications for the way we understand Milly's final act and, ultimately, the ethical dimensions of this novel. But second, this chapter advances my central contention with respect to the ethical dimensions of beauty. I suggest that beauty is nothing less than the paradigmatic case of hysteria—hysteria's *Ur*-narrative—enabling us to appreciate how a primordial aesthetic experience lies at the heart of the psychoanalytic "ethics of desire."

The final chapter returns to the question of ethical choice and judgment, only to trope it this time through the permanently vexed question of sexual difference that some recent psychoanalytic critics, notably Joan Copjec, have begun to reassess under the terms of a universal, that is, nonhistoricizable, ethic. Returning to an hypothesized moment prior even to the primordial choice of neurosis discussed in chapter 1, here I suggest that the concept of a foundational sexual "choice" instrumental in the creation of both masculine and feminine subjective identities can be given further specificity and contemporary critical relevance by relating it to one of contemporary theory's interminable bugbears: the question of whether deconstruction, specifically here in its De Manian form, is an ethical discourse.

Accordingly, in this chapter I take up the De Manian critique of the aesthetic as it is represented by Andzrej Warminski whose reading of James's short story, "The Altar of the Dead," provides a tour de force in De Manian deconstructive reading. I demonstrate how, its trenchant critique of aesthetic ideology notwithstanding, deconstruction itself epitomizes an aesthetic discourse. As it should be clear from my previous chapters, this is far from being a negative charge and, in fact, I go on to show how an ethic of beauty much like what I described in the previous chapter characterizes the deconstructive project, at least as represented by De Man and his followers. I suggest that the repetition compulsion of deconstruction, manifested in its endless productions of extraordinarily beautiful and inventive but ultimately repetitive rhetorical readings, represents a structure of deferral very like what I identified as Milly's hysterical/aesthetic solution. Such an identification then makes it possible to diagnose the deconstructive project as a hysterical discourse, designed to maintain a certain sustaining distance from what Lacan calls the Real—the unrepresentable excessive horror/enjoyment that underpins the symbolic order but for which deconstruction inevitably, for very specific structural reasons that I outline, must fail to possess a concept.

But just as important, as I suggested, this analysis of deconstruction's neurotic structure finally helps us put to rest the enduring question of whether or not there is such a thing as an ethics of deconstruction. I show that indeed there is, but that this ethic is not where deconstruction imagines it to be. What my analysis enables us to see is the specificity of where the deconstructive ethic lies with regard to what Lacan, in his *Encore Seminar*, calls the structures of sexuation. As countless female graduate students have long intuited but without quite knowing why, deconstruction is a masculine discourse, and therefore possesses a masculine ethic; deconstruction inhabits the masculine side of the Lacanian formulas of sexuation. As such, its ethics are founded on (the repression of) precisely the kind of limit signifier on which it accuses psychoanalysis of being too overly cathected, namely, the phallus. I show how it is the primordial repression of this signifier, around which its entire hysterical, that is, desiring discursive structure is subsequently built, that represents deconstruction's fundamental fantasy, its primordial *ethical* choice.

A portion of chapter 1 first appeared in *The Henry James Review*. I thank the Johns Hopkins University Press for permission to reprint it. Let me also take this opportunity to thank several individuals whose careful reading and support was crucial in the early stages of this writing: Henry

Sussman, Joan Copjec, Rodolphe Gasché, and, more recently, J. Hillis Miller, Gert Buelens, Ortwin de Graef, and Paul Armstrong. Peter Otto deserves special mention as well. I thank James Peltz for his support of this project and Laura Glenn for her help in preparing the manuscript. David Odell knows what I cannot say, namely, how much I owe him for innumerable things, including his tremendous help with the mathematical argument in the final chapter. My deepest debt is to David Ottina, whose unwavering support continues to manifest itself in a vigilant, steadfast, *ethical* resistance to the truth of psychoanalysis.

Sigi Jöttkandt
Ghent, Belgium

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1

Portrait of an Act

Representation and Ethics in *The Portrait of a Lady*

Few of James's novels have generated as much reader frustration as *The Portrait of a Lady*. While Isabel's final decision to return to Osmond famously had such supportive contemporary readers as Grace Norton confessing to having thrown the book across the room in vexation, our collective irritation today at what seems like James's distinctly perverse refusal to allow us a satisfying narrative ending manifests itself only slightly less hysterically in the growing plethora of competing critical interpretations seeking to explain—and thereby in part to mitigate—Isabel's controversial decision. Leaving aside for the moment certain formal similarities that will be discussed later on, my suggestion will be that it is not so much perversion on James's part but, rather, his attempt to represent an ethical act that leads him to resolve the novel in this contentious way.

Granted, a concern with the ethical dimension of Isabel's story is nothing new. We find this expressed both thematically—few other James characters, after all, are as fascinated with the unfolding of their ethical development as Isabel Archer,—and in its encircling critical interpretations where the novel has been understood for the most part in terms of a narrative of aesthetic/ethical education: as a female *Bildungsroman*. For a significant number of critics, Isabel's final decision to return to Osmond is best comprehended as the result of an ethical widening of perspective produced by her experience of suffering that finally enables her to integrate herself more fully into the communal body and take up a socially responsible role as Pansy's mother. But even when critics trope Isabel's