

Queer Performativity Henry James's the art of the novel

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To begin with: the divided history, hence the divided reach across present and future, of this term "performativity." In many usages I am currently hearing, it seems to be filiated only with, motivated only by the notion of a performance in the defining instance theatrical. Yet Butler's work constitutes an invitation to, in her words, "consider gender as an 'act', as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where "performative" itself carries the double-meaning of dramatic and non-referential" II (Butler, "Performative Acts," 272-73). "Performative" at the present moment carries the authority of two quite different discourses, that of theater on the one hand, of speech-act theory and deconstruction on the other. Partaking, in the prestige of both discourses, it nonetheless, as Butler suggests, means very differently in each. The stretch between theatrical and deconstructive meanings of "performative" seems to span the polarities of, at either extreme, the extroversion of the actor, the introversion of the signifier. Michael Fried's opposition between theatricality and absorption seems custom-made for this paradox about 44performativity": in its deconstructive sense performativity signals absorption; in the vicinity of the stage however, the performative is the theatrical. But in another range of usages, a text like Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* uses "performativity" to, mean an extreme of something like efficiency-postmodern representation as a form of capitalist efficiency-while, again, the deconstructive "performativity" of Paul de Man or J. Hillis Miller seems to be characterized by the dislinkage precisely of cause and effect between the signifier and the world. At the same time, it's worth keeping in mind that even in deconstruction, more can be said of performative speech-acts than that they are ontologically dislinked or introversively non-referential. Following on de Man's demonstration of 14 a radical estrangement between the meaning and the performance of any text" (298), one might want to dwell not so, much on the non-reference of the performative but rather on (what de Man calls) its necessarily "aberrant" relation to its own reference - the torsion, the mutual perversion as one might say, of reference and performativity.