Derrida and Queer Theory

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The Gift from (of the) “Behind” (Derrière): Intro-extro-duction

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Extro- prefix [alter. of L. extra-]: outward <extrovert>—compare intro-

—Webster’s Ninth

Coming from behind (derrière)—how else to describe a volume called “Derrida and Queer Theory”?—as if arriving late to the party, or, indeed, after the party is already over. After all, we already have Deleuze and Queer Theory1 and, of course, Saint Foucault.2 Judging by Annamarie Jagose’s Queer Theory: An Introduction, in which there is not a single mention of “Derrida” (or “deconstruction”)—even in the sub-chapter titled “The Post-Structuralist Context of Queer”—, one would think that Derrida was not only late to the party, but was never there at all.3


Yet, anyone who has tried to read Derrida’s *Glas* (1974)⁴—to single-out what is perhaps the most obvious example, with its double-sided, double-crossed reading(s) of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel with Jean Genet (and vice versa)—could easily get the feeling that, maybe, the great, unsurpassed work of “queer theory” already lies behind it, still waiting to be read, as if the “queer theorists” able to read a text like *Glas* (and its speculations on a “general fetishism,” for example) are still to come, as if the “future”—what lies ahead—is already “behind” (*derrière*).⁵ But a “future” that is already “behind” is perhaps less a “no future” than a “catastrophic future,” precisely in the etymological sense of an “overturning” (fr. Gk. *kata-* + *strephein* to turn—see *STROPHÉ*; Gk. *strophē*, lit., act of turning, fr. *strephein* to turn, twist; akin to Gk. *strobos* action of whirling), a “future,” then, as if turned to its “back” (*dos*)—or even backside up (who can tell?)—and thus accessible only with a kind of “(be)hindsight,” to quote Lee Edelman,⁶ for the eye, too, as Freud taught us, is a sphincter.⁷

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I say we are “still waiting” for “queer theorists” able to read a text like *Glas*, because, apparently, even Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick could not (or did not) do this. How else to explain these lines from 1990:

Deconstruction, founded as a very science of *différ(e/a)nce*, has both so fetishized [sic] the idea of difference and so vaporized its possible embodiments that its most thorough-going practitioners are the last people to whom one would now look for help in thinking about particular differences.8

It is remarkable (although not uncommon, as some essays in this volume demonstrate) to read such lines from a canonical figure of “queer theory” like Sedgwick, whose *Epistemology of the Closet* relies so much on the very “deconstruction” she/it dismisses.9 By contrast, Nikki Sullivan, whose *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* is more generous to “Derrida,” has this to say about “deconstruction” (I quote at length, if only to offset the curt dismissal of Sedgwick):

Deconstruction could be said to constitute a critical response to the humanist belief in absolute essences and oppositions. The idea that heterosexuality is a naturally occurring and fundamental aspect of one’s identity, and, moreover, that it is the polar opposite of homosexuality, is one example of humanist ontology. Deconstruction works away at the very foundation of what Derrida refers to as Western metaphysics (a historically and culturally specific system of meaning-making), by undermining the notion of polarized essences. It is important to note, however, that deconstruction is not synonymous with destruction: it does not involve the obliteration and replacement of what is erroneous with that which is held to be true. In other

9. Besides Sedgwick, canonical figures such as Judith Butler, Jonathan Dollimore, and Michel Foucault come under scrutiny here. See, for example, Martin McQuillan, “‘Practical Deconstruction’: A Note on Some Notes by Judith Butler”; Nicholas Royle, “Impossible Uncanniness: Deconstruction and Queer Theory” (Dollimore); and Geoffrey Bennington, “Just Queer” (Foucault), all in this volume.
words, a deconstructive approach to the hierarchized binary opposition heterosexuality/homosexuality would not consist of reversing the terms or of attempting to somehow annihilate the concepts and/or the relation between them altogether. Rather, a deconstructive analysis would highlight the inherent instability of the terms, as well as enabling an analysis of the culturally and historically specific ways in which the terms and the relation between them have developed, and the effects they have produced.\textsuperscript{10}

The juxtaposition of these two versions of “deconstruction” illustrates in a snapshot what might be called the disavowed debt to “Derrida” in canonical “queer theory,” and perhaps helps to explain why such a preposterous volume—“Derrida and Queer Theory”—appears (if it appears) just now.\textsuperscript{11}

Just now.

Of course, the “now” referred to by Sedgwick above—when describing the practitioners of deconstruction as “the last people to whom one would now look for help”—is “1990,” a moment now recognized—looking back in retrospect—as the emergence of “queer theory” in North America. As the editors of The Routledge Queer Studies Reader put it: “a new—or at least newly visible—paradigm for thinking about sexuality . . . emerged simultaneously across academic and activist contexts in the early 1990s, constituting a broad and unmethodical critique of normative models of sex, gender, and sexuality” (RQ xvi). It is to this “primal scene”—“the early 1990s”—that I now wish to turn, and specifically to what is/was one of the seminal texts of (nascent) “queer theory,” namely, Inside/Out (1991), a volume edited by Diana Fuss.\textsuperscript{12} Unlike the insinuations

\textsuperscript{10} Nikki Sullivan, A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory (New York: NYU Press, 2003), 50-51.
\textsuperscript{11} For more on “preposterous” (meaning literally “with hindsight in front”), rendering undecidable the straightforward positionalities of “before” and “after,” “front” and “behind,” see J. Hillis Miller, “Preposterous Preface: Derrida and Queer Discourse,” in this volume.
of Sedgwick, Fuss’s Inside/Out not only openly acknowledges its debt to “Derrida” (albeit in a footnote), but also contains what could be called a full-frontal critique of “Derrida,” written by Lee Edelman, no less, in which Derrida’s The Post Card (1980) is lumped together with John Cleland’s Fanny Hill, or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure (1749) and Tobias Smollett’s Adventures of Peregrine Pickle (1751), as three texts featuring the ostensible outrage and scandalization of a “presumptively heterosexual spectator’s unobserved surveillance of a sexual encounter between men” (ST 95). As Edelman writes:

[F]or Cleland and Smollett . . . and Derrida, as for countless others who intervene more oppressively in the politics of discursive practices, any representation of sodomy between men is a threat to the epistemological security of the observer—whether a heterosexual male himself or merely heterosexual-male identified—for whom the vision of the sodomitical encounter refutes the determinacy of positional distinctions and compels him to confront his too clear implication in a spectacle that, from the perspective of castration, can only be seen as a “catastrophe.” (ST 113)

In the case of The Post Card, of course, the “sodomitical scene” (ST 110) in question involves a 13th-century illustration of “plato” and “Socrates” by Matthew Paris reproduced on a postcard encountered in the Bodleian Library gift shop. (Fig. 1) As “Derrida” writes of this encounter in “Envois” (a loveletter dated “6 June 1977”):

For the moment, myself, I tell you that I see Plato getting an erection in Socrates’ back and see the insane hubris of his prick, an interminable, disproportionate erection traversing Paris’s head like a single idea and then the copyist’s chair,

13. In footnote 8 of her Introduction, Fuss notes: “Very few of Jacques Derrida’s works, a corpus to which the present essay is obviously indebted, fail to take up and to work over this classical figure of inside/outside.” See Diana Fuss, “Inside/Out,” in Inside/Out, 9.
before slowly sliding, still warm, under Socrates’ right leg, in harmony or symphony with the movement of this phallus sheaf, the points, plumes, pens, fingers, nails . . . .

What is going on under Socrates’ leg, do you recognize this object? It plunges under the waves made by the veils around the plump buttocks, you see the rounded double, improbable enough, it plunges straight down, rigid . . . . Do people (I am not speaking of “philosophers” or of those who read Plato) realize to what extent this old couple has invaded our most private domesticity, mixing themselves up in everything . . . . [t]he one in the other, in front of the other, the one after the other, the one behind the other? . . . this catastrophe [my emphasis—C.H.], right near the beginning, this overturning . . . our very condition, the condition of everything that was given us. (PC 18-19)
Since more than one essay in this volume already address this “sodomitical scene” (I alert the reader, in particular, to essays by Alexander García Düttmann and, especially, Jarrod Hayes, who notes that Derrida and Geoffrey Bennington re-stage this scene in a photograph included in their joint, *Jacques Derrida* [1991], in which Bennington plays [Socratic] “top” to Derrida’s [platonic] “bottom”), I will not dwell here on the many ways in which “Derrida” literally makes an ass of himself (in the “Envois” and elsewhere), explicitly implicating the proper, patronymic “Derrida” with “Derrière” (the French word for “behind”), except to point out how everything in Edelman’s full-frontal critique of “Derrida” seems to rest on a certain (mis)reading of the ubiquitous word “catastrophe” in *The Post Card*, as if behind that word lurked the moralistic condemnation and outrage of a homophobe. (Needless to say, the festering of Edelman’s catastrophic reading of “Derrida” in one of the seminal texts of “queer theory” is perhaps yet another reason why such a preposterous volume—“Derrida and Queer Theory”—appears [if it appears] just now.)

The ubiquity of the word “catastrophe” in *The Post Card* is evident in David Wills’s “Order Catastrophically Unknown,” an essay that takes its title from a passage in “Envois” (“My post card naively overturns everything. In any event, it allegorizes what is catastrophically unknown about order” [Derrida, qtd. in Wills, OCU 56]). As Wills glosses these lines:

> The French is “l’insu catastrophique de l’ordre,” which might be rendered more literally as “the catastrophic unknown concerning order.” The order Derrida is referring to is, in the first place, *sequential* ordering. He continues, “Finally

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16. In *Glas*, then, we read: “*Derrière:* every time the word comes first, if written therefore after a period and with a capital letter, something inside me used to start to recognize there my father’s name . . . . *Derrière,* behind, isn’t it always already behind [*déjà derrière*] a curtain, a veil, a weaving. A fleecing text” (G 68).
one begins no longer to understand what to come, to come before, to come after, to foresee, to come back all mean” [PC 21]. But one should also read it in the context of the generic or taxonomic conundrum that Derrida wants his postcard to represent, as the catastrophe of what is unknown concerning classification. (OCU 56; emphasis in original).

In other words, the idea that “Derrida”—or one of the many “male”/“female” voices that (de)constitute the presumed author(ity) and identity of texts such as “Envois”17—would be threatened and/or outraged by what Edelman calls a “figuration of sodomy in terms evocative of the (il)logical structure of the moebius loop, the (il)logic that dislocates such spatio-temporal ‘situations’ as ‘pre’ and ‘post,’ or ‘before’ and ‘behind’” (ST 113), seems highly unlikely given that, as Wills notes, such a “taxonomic conundrum” of straightforward sequential and classificatory “order” is precisely what The Post Card represents, and, indeed, in terms recalling a moebius loop. Hence:

What I prefer, about post cards, is that one does not know what is in front or what is in back, here or there, near or far, the Plato or the Socrates, the recto or the verso. Nor what is the most important, the picture or the text, the message or the caption, or the address. (Derrida, PC 13)

“Now what distinguishes a moebius loop,” as Edelman tells us, “is the impossibility of distinguishing its front and its back, a condition that has, as I have already implied, an immediate sexual resonance” (ST 97). And yet, remarkably, Edelman never cites the above lines from “Envois,” nor does he cite Derrida’s Right of Inspection (1985), or David Wills’s “Supreme Court” (1988) (an essay included as the “Appendix” to this volume), two texts that address and disturb many of the issues raised by Edelman (issues of surveillance; the supposed distance of the [male, heterosexual] gaze; and [lesbian] sodomy—or are

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we to assume “sodomy” as the sole privilege of “homosexual men”?)

The “catastrophe” of The Post Card, then, could perhaps be likened to the “travesty” of another found postcard, namely, the so-called rectified readymade of Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919), featuring a postcard reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mono Lisa* onto which Duchamp drew a black moustache and goatee in pencil, adding the letters “L.H.O.O.Q.” to the “bottom.” (Fig. 2)

As critics have pointed out, when pronounced in French, the letters “L.H.O.O.Q.” sound like “*Elle a chaud au cul*” [“She is hot in the ass”] (*cul*, *n.m.* Vulg. bottom, posterior, rump, backside, ass, behind; *avoir dans le cul*, to be screwed), while Jack Spector has also traced Duchamp’s allusion to the French “*queue*” in the final letter “Q” (*queue*, *n.f.* tail), thereby crossing a “feminine” phallic behind (tail) with a “masculine” hot bottom (vagina or anus?), noting Duchamp’s own loose translation of the pun as: “There’s a fire down below.”

Down where? Front or back?

“Behind there”

*Derrière da*

*Fort/da*

*DaDa-sein*

*Derridada*

dadamamapapapeepeepoopoo “etc.”

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18. As David Wills notes, antisodomy laws in the U.S. until 1968 have defined sodomy as “the carnal knowledge and connection against the order of nature by man with man, or in the same unnatural manner with woman.” See David Wills, “Supreme Court,” in this volume.


I have written elsewhere of Duchamp’s black moustache in terms of Derrida’s graphic practice of writing “under erasure” (sous rature), and vice versa, distinguishing it from Heidegger’s practice of crossing-out (überqueren) (Being), such that “Derrida and Queer Theory” would involve not simply an X-rated “Derrida,” but a (k)notty double-cross:

“Derrida and Queer Theory”

In closing, then, I turn to a counter-scene of surveillance in the corpus of “Derrida,” this time involving not a “sodomitical scene” (although, as we shall see, this is anything but certain), but what we might call a (k)notty scene of double-crossing, or interweaving, in which a prepubescent “Derrida” recalls loving “his own” shoebox silkworm(s):

Before I was thirteen, before ever having worn a tallith and even having dreamed of possessing my own, I cultivated (what’s the link?) silkworms . . . . In the four corners of a shoebox . . . I kept and fed silkworms [mullberry leaves] . . . . They were especially voracious between moultings (at the moment called the frèse). You could hardly see the mouths of these white or slightly greyish catapillars, but you could sense they were impatient to nourish their secretion . . . . They were animated only in view of the transformation of the mullberry into silk. We would sometimes say the worm, sometimes the caterpillar. I would observe the progress of the weaving . . . . Like the movement of this production, like this becoming-silk of a silk I would never have believed natural, as this extraordinary process remained basically invisible, I was above all struck by the impossible embodied in these little creatures in their shoe-box. It was not impossible, of course, to distinguish between a head and a tail, and so, virtually, to see the difference between a part and a whole, and to find some sense in the thing, a direction, an orientation. But it was impossible to discern a sex.23

I interrupt to note, not only the likeness between this trans- creature (“worm” or “caterpillar”?) and the moebius-loop undecidability of the postcard’s “frontback,” but how the “shoebox” here gets interweaved into what Derrida calls “a formalization—I attempted in Glas and elsewhere—of generalized fetishism” (SOO 350), recalling, of course, the (k)notty interlacing of “fetishism” and “art” in the leather boot(s) of Van Gogh, Heidegger, Schapiro, Freud, Magritte, etc., discussed

in “Restitutions” (1978),\(^{24}\) where following “the movement of lace” beyond the proper “frame” (parergon) transforms Van Gogh’s leather boot(s) into a kind of moebius loop—“it has an internal border and an external border which is incessantly turned back in” (R 303)—provoking the question (never answered): “To which sex are these shoes due?” (R 306).\(^{25}\) But back to Derrida’s shoebox silkworm(s):

... it was impossible to discern a sex. There was indeed something like a brown mouth but you could not recognize in it the orifice you had to imagine to be at the origin of their silk, this milk become thread, this filament prolonging their body and remaining attached to it for a certain length of time: the extruded saliva of a very fine sperm, shiny, gleaming, the miracle of a feminine ejaculation which would take the light and which I drank with my eyes. But basically without seeing anything. The serigenous glands of the caterpillar can, I’ve just learned, be labial or salivary, but also rectal . . . . The self-displacement of this little fantasy of a penis, was it erection or detumescence? . . . . What I appropriated for myself over there, afar off, was the operation, the operation through which the worm itself secreted its secretion . . . . It dribbled. (SOO 353)

The allusions to masturbation—the appropriated “operation”—here and scattered throughout the corpus of “Derrida” (from Rousseau’s “dangerous supplement” to the onanistic seeds of Dissemination),\(^{26}\)

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25. Derrida continues: “This is not exactly the same question as . . . when we were wondering whether or not there was a symbolic equivalence between the supposed “symbol” “shoe” and such-and-such a genital organ, or whether only a differential and idiomatic syntax could arrest bisexuality, confer on it some particular leading or dominant value, etc. . . . yet the attribution of shoes to a subject-wearer—of shoes and of a sex—a masculine or feminine sex, is not without its resonance with the first question . . . .

26. For more on this, see Murat Aydemir, Images of Bliss: Ejaculation/Masculinity/meaning (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2007), esp. 183-208.
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bring us back to the “brown mouth,” to the serigenous glands that, as Derrida notes above, could be “labial or salivary, but also rectal,” thus calling into question the exact “nature” of this gift we call “silk” (“spit”? “sperm”? “feminine ejaculation”? “shit”?). Freud, of course, when writing of masturbation [Masturbatorischen Sexualäusserungen] in Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905), explicitly links a sort of silky worm of shit—i.e., the brown column or phallic log in the intestines—to a problematics of the “gift” [Geschenk], as follows:

The contents of the bowels [silky worms of shit], which act as a stimulating mass upon a sexually sensitive portion of the mucus membrane [the sphincter; the brown mouth], behave like forerunners of another organ [the phallus], which is destined to come into action after the phase of childhood. But they [the silky worms of shit] have other important meanings for the infant. They are clearly treated as a part of the infant’s own body and represent his first “gift” [“Geschenk”]: by producing them [outside; extro-] he can express his active compliance with his environment and, by withholding them [inside; intro-], his disobedience. From being a “gift” they later come to acquire the meaning of “baby”—for babies, according to one of the sexual theories of children, are acquired by eating and are born through the bowels.27

This “gift” from (of the) “behind,” as Freud goes on to elaborate, via the auto-hetero-affection of the sphincter muscle—i.e., through a kind of fort/da rhythmic intro-extro-duction of the silky shit worm—becomes for the child (“male” or “female”) “a masturbatory stimulus upon the anal zone” (TS 53). (Freud implies, too, it should be noted, a vast realm of literal digital manipulation, opened by “the actual masturbatory stimulation of the anal zone by means [of the rhythmic intro-extro-duction] of the finger, provoked by a centrally determined or peripherally maintained sensation of itching” [TS 53].) Here, we might say, Freud puts his finger on something David Wills

has traced throughout the corpus of “Derrida”—”behind” its “back,”
so to speak—namely, what he calls the “dorsal turn” (something that
will have been, perhaps, behind everything we have risked here). As
Wills puts it:

What touches on the back, even the surprise prod or slap
of a friend or a stranger, implies an erotic relation, a version
of sexuality, a version that raises simultaneously and
undecidably the questions of sex and gender, of species,
and of objects. A sexuality therefore that is not, at least not
in the first instance, determined as hetero- or homosexual,
as vaginal or anal, as human (or indeed animal) or
prosthetic, not even as embracing or penetrating, but
which implies before all else a coupling with otherness.28

28. See David Wills, Dorsality: Thinking Back through Technology and
Politics (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008), 12. See also Nicholas Royle,