My preface comes both before and after, preposterously, in the etymological sense. It comes first for you, dear reader, but after for me, since it is being written after I have read all the essays in this book. I have read them with admiration and intellectual excitement. They have changed my assumptions about queer theory.¹

I have heard of a philosophy professor who said of Jacques Derrida, mendaciously, “Well, he’s dead so we don’t have to worry about him anymore.” Derrida, in the final interview with Le Monde, given just a few weeks before his death, said, perhaps ironically, perhaps not, that he expected he and all his works would be forgotten two months after his death.² Just the opposite has happened. A great outpouring of distinguished conferences, essays, and books from all over the world has occurred since his death. This book is a wonderful example of that. It is the first book focused on the relation between Derrida’s work and queer theory. The essays are admirably diverse and learned. Each explores a different facet of Derrida’s work. Each essay shows in detail a given facet’s indispensable function in one or another feature of queer theory today. Each has, in a distinctive way, an enviable conceptual and linguistic exuberance. This not only echoes Derrida’s similar exuberance, but also bears witness that the humanities are still vigorous, even in these bad times for them. These essays testify movingly to the fundamental role that Derrida’s work has played

¹. [Note: Miller’s preface was written in 2010 and refers to an earlier version of this volume, which has been slightly altered. —Ed.]
in establishing the new discourse called “queer theory.”

Permit me to call attention to one characteristic feature of these essays. They tend to turn away from the copula announced in the title between Derrida and what one might falsely imagine to be some unitary discourse called “queer theory.” One essay, for example, is about Derrida’s cats and about what he said about being an animal himself in *L’animal que donc je suis*. Another centers on Gayatri Spivak’s “Love Me, Love My Ombre, Elle,” with its wonderful pun on “umbrella.” The pun is probably a reference to Derrida’s remarks about the note Nietzsche’s editors left out as too trivial: “I have lost my umbrella.” Another spends as much time on Derrida’s speech act theory (by way of his word “perverformative”) as on queer theory as such. Still another shifts to Melville’s *Billy Budd. . . . “Et Cetera,”* to borrow the title of an essay by Derrida that Nicholas Royle collected in his *Deconstructions: A User’s Guide*.

Since the essays in this book are exercises in queer theory as well as being about it, I conclude that such diversion or perversion, in the etymological sense of a turning away, is a pervasive feature of queer theory. Nor have I escaped such deviation in my reading of an essay by Derrida later in this “preface.”

In spite of the diversity of the essays they seem, for the most part, to agree on the following propositions:

1. Queerness is not an essence, even though political and social change may depend on sometimes at least implicitly accepting the notion that a given person is male or female, straight, lesbian, or gay, just as the success of the women’s movement has depended to some degree on assuming that there is an “essence” of being “a woman.” What would the gay rights movement or the attempt in the United States to lift the ban on service in the military by “gays” be if being gay were not considered by the authorities to be an essence? Assuming otherwise might lead to the extremely threatening

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assumption that everyone, even the most apparently “straight” in feeling and behavior, is, as Freud put it, to some degree “poly-morphous perverse.” An op-ed piece by Frank Rich in the *New York Times* for February 7, 2010, “Smoke the Bigots Out of the Closet,” puts the usual assumption succinctly in the context of favoring lifting the ban on “gays” in the military: “Most Americans recognize that being gay is not a ‘lifestyle’ but an immutable identity, and that outlawing discrimination against gay people who want to serve their country is, as the admiral [Mike Mullan] said, ‘the right thing to do.’”

2. Queerness is not just socially constructed by the interpolating pressures of some vague entity called heteronormative society. Queerness is to some degree linguistically generated, even though that language may express the social forces lying behind it, and even though the resulting queerness may come to be embodied in this or that person as well as in language. Body and language are intertwined like the couples of women lovers in the photo-novel *I shall conclude this preposterous preface by discussing*. This is a controversial point, as Nicholas Royle’s polemic with Jonathan Dollimore in his essay in this volume shows. Someone who has “come out of the closet,” and who has suffered various forms of concrete persecution as a result can be pardoned for saying, “Don’t tell me it is just a matter of language!” though perhaps without quite understanding what queer theory scholars mean when they talk about language as an essential feature of queerness. Judith Butler’s exploration of “hate speech” faces this issue head on.

3. “Queer” refers not just to some form of homosexuality, or bisexuality, or ambiguous sexuality. By what some might see as an outrageous figurative extension, “queer” refers to human life and human language use in general. Queerness queers everything, as when we say, “The deal was queered.” Queerness is everywhere, like irony and like puns, and, like irony and puns, it resists control by understanding or by theoretical fiat dividing this from that, for example male from female. Queerness undoes from within


what Derrida called “phallogocentrism.” Deconstruction is not an operation performed on phallogocentrism. Phallogocentrism has always already deconstructed itself, queered itself.

4. Derrida’s writing, even those books and essays that seem to have little to do with queerness in the limited sense of homosexuality, for example “La différence,” or “Before the Law,” have determined the form “queer theory” has taken. And that, these essays all assume, is a good thing.

* * *

I could stop here, with an exhortation to all who read this preface to turn now to read the admirable essays in this book. They are irrefutable testimony to the continued power of Derrida’s writings. I cannot resist, however, putting in my two cents or my two senses of what the relation between Derrida and queer theory is. I do this in the form of commentary on a relatively little-known essay by Derrida. This essay is, already in 1985, a brilliant and exemplary piece of queer theory, even though neither Derrida, nor anyone else to my knowledge, calls it that. The book of 100 pages of black and white photographs in which the essay appears is called Droit de


9. [See David Wills’ essay, “Supreme Court” (1988), in this volume, for another early reading of this little-known essay by Derrida. Wills’s essay could itself be regarded as an exemplary piece of Derridean “queer theory,” if such a thing exists. —Ed.]
regards.\textsuperscript{10} Many pages set more than one photo in montage. The French title is translated by David Wills as “Right of Inspection.” Derrida’s essay is called “une lecture,” “a reading.”\textsuperscript{11} That’s a queer idea, if you think of it, or at least a disorienting figurative transfer: a “reading” of a sequence of photographs! What does it mean to “read” a mute photo? Derrida spends a lot of time in his essay

\textsuperscript{10} Benoît Peeters tells me in an email that he and the photographer, Marie-Françoise Plissart, at first intended to have the title in the singular, Droit de regard, “the right to look,” but had to change to the plural when they discovered a mediocre pornographic photo-book already existed with the same title, i.e. with “regard” in the singular. When Plissart and Peeters first showed the photographs to Jacques Derrida, in already finished form, “regard” was still in the singular, and Derrida was unhappy with the necessary change when he heard about it. “They have stolen your title,” he said. When Plissart and Peeters visited Derrida in Paris to ask him to write an essay about their photo-novel without words, he at first demurred, but then in the summer of 1984 wrote the wonderful essay that was then published at the end of the book and that I am discussing here.

\textsuperscript{11} Marie-Françoise Plissart, Droit de regards, avec une lecture de Jacques Derrida (Paris: Édition de Minuit, 1985); Marie-Françoise Plissart and Jacques Derrida, “Right of Inspection,” trans. David Wills, in \textit{Art & Text} 32 (Autumn, 1989), 22-94; Jacques Derrida, \textit{Right of Inspection}, photographs by Marie-Françoise Plissart, trans. David Wills (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1998). Citations from the French are identified by capitalized roman numerals, which are used in the French book. Page numbers are not given in the book version of the translation, but a miniature version of each French page is on the upper corner of each English page, so the pagination of the English translation corresponds to the pagination of the French original. Interested readers can find the context of an English citation by searching out the location of the miniature French page being translated. I have used a magnifying glass. Derrida in his essay associates magnifying with “blow ups.” The reader will note how the original photographer, Plissart, gradually, in version after version, becomes subordinated to Derrida, who after all only wrote a “reading” of the photographs that were the main “text.” Once again patriarchy has won the day, and this powerful woman’s work (though Benoît Peeters collaborated) is sold as by a man. I do not think this can be entirely explained by Derrida’s world fame.

The “credits,” or, in French, the “Générique,” of this book lists Benoît Peeters, along with Marie-Françoise Plissart, as responsible for the “Scénario et Montage” of Droit de regards. Peeters was a close collaborator with Plissart in setting up the photographs and arranging their
worrying about that. As Derrida, or one of his spokespersons, says in the first sentence of his reading of the photographs by Marie-Françoise Plissart that open the book and that precede Derrida’s reading: “—Tu ne sauras jamais, vous non plus, toutes les histoires que j’ai pu encore me raconter en regardant ces images” (I). (“You [tu] will never know, nor will you [vous], all the stories I kept telling myself as I looked at these images.”) This sentence already exemplifies the complex play of pronouns that takes place in Derrida’s reading. He lists them at one place: “je, tu, vous, il, elle, on, nous, vous, elles, ils” (III). Somewhat similarly, I could never finish telling all the stories Derrida’s reading of “Droit de regards,” not to speak of the photographs themselves, makes me want to tell. Perforce, however, I must be (relatively) brief. I shall only touch, and lightly, on several facets

sequence. He has been kind enough to read my essay, make suggestions, confirm my readings of the photographs, and to send me in email messages an abundance of precious information about the genesis of this remarkable work and about its intended meaning or, rather, resistance to clear meaning. I have incorporated much of this information here and there in my essay. Where I refer to or cite what he has told me, it is to be understood that I am citing his emails to me of different dates in February, 2010. Benoît Peeters has also generously arranged permission to reproduce several of the photos in my essay. They are copyright © Marie-Françoise Plissart. I am extremely grateful to Marie-Françoise Plissart for this permission and to Benoît Peeters for his invaluable help.

For an account of Benoît Peeters’ work in the “photo-novel,” including Droit de regards, see his “À la recherche du roman-photo,” a chapter of his Écrire l’image: Un itinéraire (Brussels: Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2009), 29-46, esp. 35-38. He speaks in this section of his book about his collaboration for Droit de regards with Marie-Françoise Plissart: “Contrary to what happens with the comic strip, much more with cinema, no sharp separation existed between the scenario and its realization in our photo-novel work. Marie-Françoise Plissart intervened more and more in the elaboration of the scenario; I was present during the taking of the photographs, even though it was she who physically took them; as for the selection of images and putting them in pages, we worked together” (36) (my trans.). Plissart and Peeters intended to have their photo-novel without words entirely resistant to translation into words, to have it “make sense,” if it does make sense, entirely as a visual experience (Écrire l’image, 35-6). That did not stop Derrida from writing his “reading,” though he insists repeatedly in that reading that nothing can be said about the photographs, that they do not need or accommodate words.
of this wonderful double book.

I urge everyone, however, to get a copy of Droit de regards in French or in English, and to read Derrida’s essay, preferably in French or with the French and English side by side. As much as any of Derrida’s writings it depends on more or less untranslatable wordplay in French. This wordplay is not just willful linguistic hijinks. It is essential to what Derrida is saying, as I promise to show. Wills’s explanatory footnotes call attention, helpfully, but also somewhat helplessly, since there would be no end to such footnoting, to some of the difficulties of translation. They are compounded by Derrida’s penchant not just for puns and other wordplay, but also for outrageous and unauthorized neologisms. I shall return later to the function of this wordplay that is not play.

One reason for reading the original French is that this version contains all one hundred of the photographs’ pages. Wills’s translation in the first publication in *Art & Text* only reproduces some of them, and in reduced size. The book version in English reproduces all. The other reason is that Derrida persuasively, though counter-intuitively, argues that the photographs are in French. That seems like a weird or even queer idea, particularly since the photographs have no captions or balloons. They are speechless. Here, however, is what Derrida, or one of his spokespersons, says to another spokesperson: “Car si je vous suis, ce chef-d’oeuvre photographique serait lié par un contrat secret aux ressources originales d’une langue, le français. Voilà des photographies intraduisibles, illisible dans un pays done les habitants ne seraient francophones. Parleriez-vous de photographies de langue française?” (XX) (“For if I follow you, this photographic masterpiece would be bound by a secret agreement to the original resources of a particular language, namely French. These photographs would be untranslatable, illegible in a country where French isn’t spoken. Would you go so far as to speak of photographs being ‘in French’?”)

The simplest way to take this—though not the only way—is to think of the photographs as rebuses, charades, tableaux, mute visual expressions of some word or phrase, in all cases in French. I shall return to this oddness. If the photographs are in French then any adequate “reading” of them by means of verbal discourse will also, necessarily, be in French. I’ve therefore given some of my citations in the original French as well as David Wills’s English translation.
Fig. 1: Marie-Françoise Plisset, *Droit de regards* (1985), photo 3.
I remember that when Derrida gave me a copy of *Droit de regards* twenty-five years ago, he smiled and said, “Don’t just look at the photos. Read my essay.” I see what he means. The one hundred black and white photo pages come in groups or sequences, or in a series of series (if that is what they are) of stills from apparently ongoing actions like making love or playing checkers or walking rapidly in long halls of a grand but empty and dilapidated palace or palaces (“palace” or “hôtel” in French), down stairways, before mirrors, and in gardens or in sometimes rather sinister streets. Benoît Peeters tells me that the intention was to create a labyrinthine series of photographs that would resist rational understanding. No captions or balloons, such as an ordinary photo-novel would have, and no words but an enigmatic notebook entry in Spanish one of the characters (“Pilar”) is shown writing (Peeters tells me in an email it is from Borges’s *El hacedor* [The Maker]); the word “filter” on a

12. Here is what Peeters’s email says: “From one end of the book to the other, places are mixed, unrecognizable, undecidable. We wanted to make space as labyrinthine as time, to break all the effects of linearity. We have used two ‘palaces,’ as you say, passing from one to the other in complete freedom. We have especially used an old abandoned department store, ‘Old England,’ on the ‘Place Royale’ (again a ‘King’!), in the heart of Brussels. These different places pleased us especially for the echoes that they created of *Last year in Marienbad.*” (my trans.).

13. More precisely, it is from a short prose poem in Borges’s book called “Los espejos velados” (“The Draped Mirrors”). See Jorge Luis Borges, *El hacedor* (Madrid: Alianza, 1997), 19, 20; *ibid. Dreamtigers*, trans. Mildred Boyer and Harold Morland (New York: Dutton, 1970), 27. Much could be said about the function of this citation in Plissart’s photo-novel. The passage “Pilar” is photographed writing in her notebook expresses the “horror of a spectral duplication or multiplication of reality” felt “before large mirrors,” such as the “psyché” Derrida names in his essay, with help from Francis Ponge, or such as all those large mirrors shown in Plissart’s photographs, or such as the photographs themselves as mirrors of reality. Borges’s odd text then goes on to tell the story (only part is written down by Pilar) of the speaker’s (non)love affair with a girl who goes mad because she sees his image rather than her own in the mirrors in her room. She therefore drapes her mirrors. The first sentence of Borges’s text, not written down by Pilar, recalls the Islamic belief that if you defy the prohibition against representations of living creatures you will at judgment day commanded to bring them to life. When you fail, you will be cast with the images “into the fires of punishment” (“al fuego del castigo”).
Fig. 2: Marie-Françoise Plissart, *Droit de regards* (1985), photo 1.
cigarette box; strange letters in chalk on a wall: DE=OR, with the word SEX erased but faintly visible just above on the wall (Derrida saw only “SE”); and part of a “no smoking” sign in Flemish and French on an inside wall of the palace. The photographs were all taken in bilingual Brussels. The credits at the end mention “l’Hôtel Astoria” and “l’Hôtel Palace,” which suggest that two vacant mansions were used as sets, but Benoit Peeters tells me in an email, as I have already noted, that they also used a defunct Brussels department store. That store was called, ironically enough, “Old England,” as when a restaurant in the United States advertises itself as serving “authentic French cuisine.” (See footnote 12) The sequences may or may not be in chronological order. They may or may not be coherent sequences in themselves. The first and last sequence shows in great detail close-ups of two women making love, or at any rate in poses mimicking making love, or at any rate that is what it looks like they are doing. (See Figs. 1-3) Peeters says the lovemaking is always frustrated, never complete. Someone with a camera, the reader should remember, was there to take pictures of this mimic lovemaking, as of the other sequences. The characters are always shown in couples, but a third hidden spectator is always there to click the camera shutter. Often a third woman is shown on the sidelines, looking on. (See Fig. 4) So it’s always a threesome, with an odd woman out. Sometimes a camera-woman is shown at the edge of the scene snapping pictures. The end seems to loop back around to the beginning to make a single sequence, as in Finnegans Wake, though that is not certain, since the rooms are clearly different, even though the women are the same. The two assignations appear to take place in two different empty and dilapidated buildings. The photographed entrances are different.

The first scene takes place on a low bed in a sumptuous room in an empty and dilapidated “palace.” This room has elaborate windows, walls with mouldings, doors, mirrors, and an elaborate chandelier. Two paintings with baroque or rococo scrolled frames are built into the wall high above the bed. (See Fig. 3) Though the paintings are hard to make out, the right hand one seems to show two more or less naked women in poses not unlike those of the “real women” on the bed, though the painted ladies are not entangled in one another’s arms, while the left hand one looks to my eye faintly like another half-naked woman on the right side being looked at by
Fig. 3: Marie-Françoise Plissart, *Droit de regards* (1985), photo 7.
a male figure on the left, perhaps a faun or satyr looking at a nymph, perhaps Bacchus looking at Ariadne. You, dear reader, should exercise your own “right of inspection” over these paintings. Derrida does not comment on the paintings, therefore not on the way they echo what is taking place on the bed, in another of the mises en abyme that abound in the photos.

Five different women appear in the photographs, plus one man. Some take photographs. Derrida calls them, without any authority whatsoever for doing so, Dominique, Claude, Camille, Andrea, and Pilar. The male he calls Pedro. In addition, another sequence shows two young and fully clothed girls, heavily made up, whom Derrida names, again without authority, Marie and Virginie, because of their “perverse virginité” (XXXI). They are photographed performing various actions. These mimic in detail all the other sequences, including the motifs of cigarette smoking and drinking, running down stairs, falling on the stairs, chasing one another down corridors, photographing one another, being reflected in various mirrors, embracing on a bed, playing French checkers, and so on. They are shown playing at being women (jouant aux dames), with an intentional pun, as Peeters tells me, on jeu de dames, the French name for checkers). (See Fig. 4)

It is hard to resist exercising your “droit de regard” with the lovemaking sequences especially, though Derrida observes that these are images, not realities. Nevertheless, looking at them raises (for me) all sorts of questions and feelings about what it means to be a “male” spectator of “lesbian” lovemaking, even if their status as photographs or sometimes photographs of photographs distances the scenes. I become the excluded third, like a number of the putatively female personages in these photographs, an envious onlooker of the pleasure of others, even a voyeur. Marcel Proust famously dramatizes male jealousy of lesbian sexuality, in À la recherche du temps perdu. His putatively straight protagonist, “Marcel,” sees through a window Mlle Vinteuil making love with her partner and spitting on her father’s photograph. Later Marcel suffers torments of jealousy aroused by his unverifiable suspicion that his beloved Albertine has women lovers. This is, scholars note, a transposition of the jealousy the real Marcel Proust felt about the possible infidelity of his male partner, a chauffeur and aviator, who died in a plane crash, just as Albertine died unexpectedly in a fall from a horse. Note the bisexual
Fig. 4: Marie-Françoise Plissart, *Droit de regards* (1985), photo 67.
name, “Albertine.” It is like the names “Claude, “Dominque,” “Andrea,” and “Pilar,” Derrida gives to the five women in the photographs. Four of those names can be used for either males or females (André for Andrea), as Derrida implicitly notes in a passage in “Circonfession” about his cousin named “Claude.” He apparently had both male and female cousins of that name. The passage in “Circonfession,” at least one essay in this book notes, is perhaps the only explicit references Derrida makes to his “impossible homosexuality” or bisexuality.\textsuperscript{14} I say the personages in the photos are “evidently” female because three at least are photographed at times unclothed and appear anatomically female. “Pilar” means “pillar” in Spanish. It is a woman’s name, an abbreviation of “Maria del Pilar,” a reference to “Nostra Señora del Pilar,” “Our Lady of the Pillar.” This is a reference to the way the Virgin is in Spain commonly shown standing on a pillar, combining the phallic pillar and the Virgin Mary. So “Pilar” is another androgynous name. The “real names” of these actresses and the one actor (in the order of their appearance or, as the French say, “apparition,” as if they were ghosts) are given in the “Générique,” the “Credits” or “Trailer” printed at the beginning and end of Droit de regards. I shall return to that odd (to an American ear) word, “Générique.”

Derrida says all the pictures in Droit de regards are images,

simulacra at several removes from the staged “reality” Plissart photographed, since each original photograph is reproduced, photographed again, for the book, and since the characters are often shown taking photographs of one another, in a photograph of a photograph, or are shown in the act of snapping a picture, exercising one form of the “droit de regards.” A number of actual photographs are photographed as part of another photograph and even shown framed on the wall, in another mise en abyme. (See Fig. 5) One chief topic of Derrida’s reading and of the photographs themselves is photography. He cites Walter Benjamin as having noted that photography and psychoanalysis appeared at the same time, both forms of a modern “right of inspection” (XXIII). Both use a technique of the “blow up” to magnify small details and inspect them for hidden significance.

Derrida explores at length in various places in his “reading” the complex meanings the phrase “droit de regards” may have. Taking a photograph is an exercise of the “right to inspection,” but so is just looking, as you or I look, or as Derrida once upon a time looked, at the photographs, or as the characters in the photographs look at one another, though never, as Derrida observes, directly in one another’s eyes, and often, as Derrida also sees, seeing without being seen seeing, as a kind of lurking spy, sometimes a spy with a camera. When you spy or take a covert photograph, however, take care, since someone else may be snapping a picture of you. All these photographers are being photographed. Droit de regards also can name a legal right exercised by some higher authority, as David Wills notes in the “Translator’s Note” to the book version in English. 15 You are not granted a right to inspect the photographs in the Amazon listing of Wills’s translation, though you can see the cover, back, and sample pages of Derrida’s text in translation. Amazon withholds the “droit de regard.” Our youngest daughter, when she was three or four, put her eye up against her mother’s leg and repeated what the mother had often said: “I’ve got my eye on you!” The “droit de regard” is not distant and impersonal, but close, intimate, bodily.

Though all these photos are staged simulacra, nevertheless,
they attract your attention, to put it mildly, as does the challenge of figuring out what story or stories are hidden behind these images. Both arouse desire. Perhaps it is the story of a woman’s betrayal of her male partner by way of a liaison with a woman. One sequence, the only one involving a man, suggests that. That may be why he is angry enough to smash a drinking glass on the floor. Two of the women wear a ring, though it looks to me as if the rings are on the middle fingers of the left hand, rather than the fourth fingers, as would be the case for a married woman’s wedding ring, at least in the United States. Is there some queer code in the rings’ placement? Perhaps in the photographs it is a question of an all-female triangle of lesbian jealousy, or several such. Attention to tiny details, as Derrida notes, is necessary to “reading” these photographs, in a way that echoes, as I have said, the attention to perhaps significant detail in psychoanalysis.

Finding such stories would be at least one way of putting the sequences together. Unfortunately none of the stories can be verified. The photographs do not speak. They keep mum. They tell no tales. They keep their secrets, though they generate endless stories in the beholder’s imagination. The sequences may represent a game of checkers (“jeu de dames” in French), since two games of checkers are photographed and the photos record an intricate play of black and white squares in windows, floors, walls, mirrors, a chest of drawers, women dressed in white or black, etc. Each photo page may correspond to one of the 100 squares, or “cases,” in a French checkerboard, or “damier.” An infinite number of other possible stories may be mimed, perhaps all at once. The absence of any captions, or balloons, or verbal subtext, such as are given, for example in Art Spiegelman’s Maus, means that the stories these pictures tell are fundamentally undecidable.16 The spectator is on

16. A splendidly comic passage in Mark Twain’s Life on the Mississippi hyperbolically expresses this undecidability. To reverse the common adage, Twain implies that a caption is worth a thousand pictures. The interpretation of a picture is, for Twain, necessarily verbal. Without an explicit indication in words of what the frozen narrative moment the picture represents, the spectator vibrates back and forth among contradictory alternative stories. The picture might be illustrating any of them. On this, see my Illustration (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992; London: Reaktion Books, 1992).
Fig. 5: Marie-Françoise Plissart, *Droit de regards* (1985), photo 18.
her or his own, but without any possibility of verifying her or his conclusions. That is one aspect of the pictures’ queerness, as Derrida indicates, though without using that word.

The fascination these pictures inspire, the desire to make sense of them, makes it easy to forget to read Derrida’s “reading.” That would be a mistake, since it is a work of great genius and without doubt a prototypical work of queer theory and of queer discourse, though Derrida does not describe it as that.

* * *

In the interests of brevity and to avoid interminable reflections, like all those mirror images and images of images, photos of photos, in the photos, framing doorways behind doorways receding back to infinity, etc., I shall concentrate on two ways “Droit de regards” is an essay in queer theory. I say “interminable reflections” not only because of the complexity of the essay in itself, but also because it is interlaced with the lexicon and the “concepts” of all Derrida’s other work before and after, for example the notion of the “tout autre,” the “wholly other,” to which we have “a relation without relation” (“ce rapport sans rapport”) (XXXV), or of a “hauntology,” as in Specters of Marx.\footnote{Jacques Derrida, Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994); \textit{ibid.}, Spectres de Marx: L’état de la dette, le travail du deuil, et la nouvelle Internationale (Paris: Galilée, 1993).} The essays in Derrida and Queer Theory testify to the way Derrida’s work forms an immensely complex whole that is not a whole.

The two topics on which I shall touch are coupled in a single phrase early in Derrida’s essay. He (or whichever of the plural interlocutors is speaking; I shall return to this plurality) says of the photo sequences: “The \textit{question of genre} is of course a name I give to it, a common name, a name like any other, although it is also the name of everything else (or ‘of something entirely other’?)” (trans. modified). (“\textit{La question du genre, bien sûr, c’est un nom que je lui donne, un nom commun, un nom comme un autre mais c’est aussi le nom de tout autre chose}” [VI]). Well, it is not exactly “a name like
Fig. 6: Marie-Françoise Plissart, Droit de regards (1985), photo 23.
any other,” since every name has its peculiarities, this one included, just as does every proper name. What does it mean, for example, when a name takes the form of a question? Just what is involved in the act of unauthorized naming? Naming is a sovereign speech act, for sure. It is one of J.L. Austin’s paradigmatic examples in *How To Do Things with Words*.

The speaker, whoever she or he is at this early moment in Derrida’s reading, goes on to specify that the name he (or she) proposes is double. It both names the question of what entirely new genre, a genre for which the name is still lacking, the 100 photo pages create and, at the same time, it names the question of genre in the sense of gender: “What genre does this work belong to? But it is here that the said question of genre doubles over on itself; it suddenly becomes two while also being only one, it remains alone, a single double coupled as one.” (“De quel genre cette œuvre relève-t-elle? Mais voici que ladite question du genre se dédouble aussitôt, elle fait deux d’un coup, toutefois ne faisant qu’une aussi, elle reste seule, une seule double en une coupée” [VI].) The implicit reference, of course, is to the coupling of the two (evidently) women in two (or one, if the one at the end loops back on the one at the beginning) of the photo sequences. The two women make the “beast with two backs,” as Iago calls it (*Othello*, I, 1, 126), there before the spectator’s eyes, in which two become one, in two different queer ways. The photographs show the women both face to face and also both lying on their backs, one atop the other, back to front, a double beast with one back and one front. This last pose is, it may be, a rebus for the doubling of pieces in the French version of checkers, *le jeu de dames*, to make what we call “Kings” and what the French call “Dames,” in a reversal of our gender for checker pieces. I shall return to this.

Let me lay out, in the simplest and most schematic way the assumptions that underlie Derrida’s “reading” and make it a masterwork of queer theory before the fact. Traditional gender binaries assume that a given person is either male or female, immutably. Males are the superior gender, with females a defective image of “man.” These fallacious assumptions, in Derrida’s view,
are fundamentally linked to what he calls “logocentrism.” Hence Derrida’s famous portmanteau word, “phallogocentrism.” The word implicitly combines “genre” in both senses: the various genres of Western discourse and Western assumptions about gender. Logocentrism assumes that: 1) Good stories have a beginning, end, and underlying unifying ground or *logos*, so that any narrative collection of words or other signs (such as a series of photographs) tells, or ought to tell, one identifiable and verifiable story. 2) Words are, or ought to be, univocal. They ought to have a single dominant head meaning. Puns and word play are accidental infelicities that should be avoided. Grammar and syntax should also be unambiguous. 3) As a result, a given collection of words or other signs, in any rule-governed genre, should be open to a definitive, unambiguous, verifiable, and unified reading. Any story that cannot be read that way is defective, missing some essential member or part, like a spiral or an open circle, just as women, in the tradition going back to Aristotle, are seen as defective men.

Deconstruction is the dismantling of these radically sexist assumptions, or, rather, it is the demonstration that in any given case they have always already dismantled themselves. Insofar as this dismantling always takes the form of a putting in question of fixed gender binaries, and it always does take that form, even if sometimes only implicitly, then one can say that “Deconstruction is queer theory.”

This deconstruction of gender binaries by the photographs that make up *Droit de regards* is asserted overtly in more than one place in Derrida’s “lecture.” In one case, this happens through a characteristic play on the word “*touche,*” and also with a characteristic reference back to another author important for Derrida, Stéphane Mallarmé. By constructing a new temporality and a new interior space, “a *topophotographic* event,” say two of Derrida’s speakers:

— . . . the work “tampers with” sexual difference, in the sense in which Mallarmé once said that “verse had been tampered with” [*on a touché au vers*]. (You see, we are progressing through a series of touchings and touch-ups, while passing the word or camera among us.) Thus someone has dared to transgress, move around, displace,
and upset the order. For if something has moved in this series of immobilized poses or frozen movements, it is well and truly that. The sexual marks or boundaries always cling to the edges, ready to pass over to the other side. Inversion always seems imminent, at least in terms of the alternating *parerga* [marginal elements, outside the main “work”] connected with the body: the play of black and white clothes, pants, dresses, tights, and then the range of hair styles: long or short, boyish or otherwise, over the ears or not, the head completely shaved, male and female at the same time.

— It is not just that they have tampered with sexual difference. “It” seems to do it to itself [*Celle-ci semble se toucher elle-même*], by means of, although not within the limits of what one might rashly call, starting from the “original” or “primal scene,” homosexuality and the masturbatory caress. All the possible narratives, all the origins [*génèses*] of sexual difference are held in reserve. (XI-XII in the French)

The speaker apparently means by “primal scene” the opening sequence in the photographs showing the two “women” making love. (See Figs. 1-3) The ironic reference, however, is to Freud’s definition of the “primal scene” as the lovemaking between my parents that engendered me and that I want to be able to see, or to have been able to see, in a sovereign exercise of the “droit de regard.” Whether this opening scene is really the primal scene is elsewhere put in question in the “lecture.” It may be, as one of Derrida’s interlocutors affirms, a memory or an unconscious image within one or both of the woman in a later sequence showing two women in bed together (Fig. 5), only one of whom is the same as one in the first sequence: “One of the two women, awake or asleep, is able to dream up this photograph, dream about it, develop within it the story of its potential (real or phantasmatic, but always photographic) development. According to this hypothesis, the original scene [Figs. 1-3] would only be a derivative part included within a development whose own ordering would have ‘already’ ‘begun’ in another primal scene [Fig. 5] that is prior to it but that comes later in the exposition” (XIV in the French). Later one of
Derrida’s interlocutors reformulates this law of reversibility, crucial to Derrida’s “lecture,” this time apropos of the photograph of Claude’s fall down some steps. That photograph appears as the last in the montage that makes up photo page 17, but reappears framed and hanging over the bed in photo 18 (Fig. 5): “As with all that follows, everything that precedes takes place in this photograph, can be engendered by it or lose itself in it, begin or end. But it can also occur within the depths of another photo, such as one of those that serve to trigger or launch another move” (XXXII in the French).

Since sexual difference has been definitively tampered with or “touched” by the photographs and by Derrida’s discourse about them, I shall try systematically to keep the usual words—“male,” “female,” “straight,” “gay,” “lesbian,” “homosexual”—suspended, at least implicitly, by the clothespins of quotation marks. Derrida argues in one place, with Agamben’s help, that to think (penser) itself is a form of suspension (XXV in the French). The words I have just listed express the attempts at legal and patriarchal control by the phallogocentric authorities and their police, for example those in charge of copyright protection of the photographs and of Derrida’s commentary.

In Derrida’s “Lecture” of Droit de regards the double deconstruction of genre takes two forms:

1. The series of 100 photo pages is persuasively shown to be itself a work of queer theory and a questioning of genre/gender fixities in their interrelation. Not only, for example, is the apparently commanding personage or “Grande Dame,” “Pilar,” with her, his, its shaved head and androgynous clothes, ambiguous in gender (Fig. 7), and not only is queer lovemaking photographed as well as other forms of queer desire, but also the photographs in their sequencing are a systematic undoing of the three phallogocentric assumptions about words, grammar, and stories I have identified above. One of Derrida’s speakers puts this succinctly: “— Sexual difference has been tampered with by this photographing photographs. The always existing possibility of such a montage brings together the two questions of genre in a coupling, the two separating and dividing up the territory in order to join up later, one returning to the other, like a phantom . . .” (XII). Derrida’s reading is a brilliant and hyperbolically exuberant demonstration that this is the case.
2. Derrida’s own discourse is in manifold ways not just a conceptual identification, through analysis of the photographs as example, of the presuppositions of what came to be called queer theory. It also *enacts* the thing it talks about in its own form and language. It is “perverformative.”\(^ {19} \) It is definitely queer, like the photographs it “reads.”

* * *

Let me expand on these two points. First the photographs themselves: As Derrida shows in detail, they dramatize gender uncertainty in various ways. Moreover, as an essential concomitant of that uncertainty, it is impossible to make a verifiable unified story out of the sequences. No definite beginning, middle, and end. Aristotle would have been appalled. The inspector/reader can, as Derrida’s first speaker begins by saying, make innumerable different stories out of the sequences of sequences. It is, furthermore, impossible to tell what temporal order the different sequences actually have, or had, or should have, since there appear to be manifold flashbacks and flashforwards. The sequences are endlessly reversible. Each sequence can be seen as proleptic, metaleptic, and analeptic. The sequences may be a hyperbolic example of *hysteron proteron*, “late–early,” the cart before the horse. Derrida once mentions *hysteron proteron* in the “lecture” (XXI in the French). Some sequences, as I have said of one important such possibility, may represent dreams or fantasies of one character or another, and so be inside another sequence rather than adjacent to it. The photographs of a chest of drawers with photographs in one drawer is a visual rebus of this possibility. Benoît Peeters observes in *Écrire l’image* that the chest of drawers is a visual pun on a French idiom, “*récit à tiroirs,*” a story in ”invaginated” segments, one inside the other. In English we call the inserted story an “interpolated tale” (Peeters, 36).

As Derrida repeatedly says, the part may be larger than the whole, while at the same time being contained within that whole.

\(^ {19} \) [For more on the “perverformative,” see Éamonn Dunne’s essay, “Deco-pervo-struction,” in this volume. —Ed.]
Fig. 7: Marie-Françoise Plissart, Droit de regards (1985), photo 51.
The entire set of photographs may represent a game of checkers, which would then be the “first level” of mimesis, the “primal scene,” as Derrida calls more than one of the sequences, among others the scene(s) of apparently lesbian lovemaking that opens and closes the suite of photos.

Checkers is called “draughts” in England and, by a fortuitous accident, “jeu de dames” in French. The pieces are called “pions.” Taking another piece by jumping it is called “eating” it. What we in the United States call “Kings,” the French call “Dames,” that is the doubling of a piece, making a pile of two pieces, when it reaches the far end of the opponent’s side of the board. Becoming a Dame is a vast extension of a pion’s power, of its droit de regard, in one sense of that phrase. The Dame or King, as any checker-player knows, can “jump” any adjacent other piece or pieces in any direction on a diagonal, sometimes “taking” a multitude of the opponent’s pieces in a single move, hopskipping back and forth across the board. A pion can also make multiple jumps, though only forward at a diagonal.20

Calling this game a “jeu des dames” falls into Derrida’s hands as a way of naming the complex interactions among the various women and girls that take place in the sequences. It is a good example of the way the photographs are “in French.” The ambiguities of gender difference are highlighted by the fact that a feminine game in French is masculine in English. Our “King” is their “Dame.” How queer! A French checkerboard, a “damier,” has one hundred squares or “cases,” ten by ten, with twenty pieces on each side, whereas an American checkerboard has only sixty-four squares, eight by eight, with twelve pieces on each side.

The two jeux de dames, one between two of the young girls and the other the shaven-headed personage (“Pilar”) is photographed setting up (which may or may not be the same board and game), are not, however, explicitly encompassing events, since each is also just a part of one of the sequences. This is a good example of the systematic way the part/whole relation in the photographs is subject to an illogical reversibility. Any one of the sequences may be inside one of the others, or outside and encompassing it, just as the

chronological sequence is endlessly reversible or able to be re-arranged in any order.

What the photographs are, that is, photographs, is often represented in the sequences, for example in the form of framed photographs on the wall, or of photographs and people reflected in mirrors, or of torn photographs on the pavement in checkerboard-like cobblestone squares, or photographs of a camera or of someone using a camera to photograph someone, becoming a spectator who is exercising his or her “droit de regards” over the photographs, or in the form of a room that is like the inside of a box camera (camera means “room” in Italian), or by way of a doorway that looks like a camera lens facing you. By means of this complexity, a vertiginous, abyssal set of stories within stories is “developed.” That structure is also mimed in the elaborate framing of doorways behind doorways in some of the photographs, a visible mise en abyme (Figs. 5-6).

Note, however, the way the photographs and Derrida’s reading of them by way of technical camera terms like “develop,” “diaphragm,” “lens,” and “shutter” refer to a now more or less archaic photographic apparatus. Had the photographs been taken with digital cameras, downloaded to a computer and altered there with Photoshop, the rhetoric of the photos and of Derrida’s punning discourse about them would have been impossible, or at least would have needed to be drastically altered. One photo sequence shows one of the young girls taking a polaroid photo and pulling it out of the polaroid camera, then later cutting it up. How quaint! But the possibility of doing that is essential to the action being photographed. Nowadays it is not so easy to destroy a photograph once it is taken. Photos have a way of proliferating around in cyberspace in innumerable copies.

Derrida gives in one place the name “invagination” (already used by me) to the inside/outside reversal mentioned above as a feature of photographs of photographs. This is another example of a happy (for Derrida) word that both describes a physical form and has a sexual meaning. “Vagina” means “sheath” in Latin. “Invagination” is a medical term naming the reversal of outside into inside in a bodily organ or organs. Invagination is a turning inside out and outside in that is like turning the finger of a glove back into the glove, or the toe of a sock back inside the sock. What was the “outside” of the glove or sock is now “inside.” The outside surface
becomes an inside surface. Derrida uses the word “invagination” more than once elsewhere, for example in “The Law of Genre” and “Living On: Border Lines.”21 The photographs in Droit de regards are, or may be, a spectacular example of invagination in more than one sense. One of the most overt of these is what Derrida calls the climactic “coup de theater” of the whole 100 photos. He observes that this short sequence resists being made part of a discursive, linguistic accounting. It is purely visual, purely “montage.” It does something you can do in pictures but not in words. It breaks the law of verbal, logical, grammatical, phallogocentric representation.

In this climactic theatrical gesture, one of the young girls confronts a framed photograph hanging on the wall of the first scene in the sequence of the interaction of “Marie” and “Virginie,” a “long shot.” She (Marie) takes it down, holds it high over her head, and smashes it on the floor, in a highly dramatic gesture that echoes an earlier moment when the one male character angrily smashes a drinking glass on the floor. The photograph magically changes when it reaches the floor into a different framed photograph covered in broken glass, perhaps a broken mirror, perhaps the transparent glass that once covered the framed photograph. The photograph now shows the girl in the act of casting the first photograph down. (See Fig. 8) Talk about invaginations and mises en abyme! Derrida’s spokespersons, as you might imagine, have a lot to say about this event:

— . . . One of the heavily made-up little girls, Marie, raises the framed photograph—it is the opening credits or trailer for their sequence [leur propre générique]—over her head. For a moment she resembles Moses in a tableau concerning the law or rights of inspection [le droit de regard], holding it above her head before dashing it to the ground. The glass shatters like the stone tablets [les Tables de la loi], like the Decalogue. But what the photograph shows is more or less indescribable within the normal system of objective representation (as if one had transgressed the Judaic

Fig. 8: Marie-Françoise Plissart, *Droit de regards* (1985), photo 81.
prohibition against iconic representation).

— So stop naming and describing, let them look. This was set up for the very purpose of discouraging or preventing you from speaking about it, in order to put a limit on your discourse, to limit the norms to which discourse generally subscribes, its grammar. What you can’t say keep silent about. [This is a reference to a famous formulation by Ludwig Wittgenstein at the end of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.* (JHM)] What you can’t arrange in the space of representation or according to the grammar of your discourse is, however, to be found *there,* in this *tableau.* This tableau of the shattered tablet is possible in accordance with the grammar of photographic montage . . . . (XXXIII in the French; trans. modified)

The photographs hide an unpresentable, unrepresentable secret, or may hide such a secret, as Derrida says at the beginning of his “lecture.” It is nevertheless possible to present or to hint at this secret in an indescribable montage, a grammar foreign to verbal discourse. Derrida’s “reading” ends with a claim that the photographs’ resistance to phallogocentric domination means that, in their spiraling reversibility, they should be called not only “*Droit de regards,*” but also “*l’invention de l’autre,*” the invention or finding of the other, in both senses of the genitive, inventing the other and becoming subject to an act of invention by the other. “*L’invention de l’autre*” is of course the subtitle of both a book by Derrida called *Psyché: Inventions de l’autre* and of the title essay in the book, called “*Psyché: Invention de l’autre.*”22 That essay takes off from Francis Ponge’s little poem “Fable,” cited at the end of Derrida’s “lecture” and also discussed in his book on Ponge, *Signéponge/Signsponge.*23 Ponge’s poem is an appropriate place to end the “lecture” because it economically names and exemplifies the invagination and temporal reversal that Derrida identifies in the photographs called *Droit de regards.* The poem begins with the invaginated lines, “*Par le mot par

22. See footnote 14.
The poem ends with a parenthetical sentence in parentheses and italics that reverses the temporality of the folk belief that breaking a mirror brings seven years of bad luck: “(APRES sept ans de malheurs/Elle brisa son miroir.” (“AFTER seven years of misfortunes / She broke her mirror”) (XXXVI in the French). For Ponge the bad luck precedes the mirror breaking, in another hysteron proteron. “Psyche” is a Greek word meaning “wind,” “breath,” and “soul.” It is also the name of a mythological figure, the female protagonist in the late Greek story about Cupid and Psyche that dramatizes a battle over the “droit de regards.” “Psyche” is also a French word for a large pivoting mirror, such as that in which a woman or man can look at herself or himself, narcissistically, from head to toe, in the privacy of bedroom, bathroom, or boudoir.

* * *

I have now shown that Derrida shows (in a doubling showing) that the photographs labeled “Droit de regards” are a work in queer theory. The photographs create a new genre appropriate for raising “la question du genre,” in both senses of the word. These senses are as closely intertwined as the bodies of the lovers in the opening and closing sequences of photographs. The photographs’ form and the stories they tell are deconstructions of phallogocentrism. I shall now show that Derrida’s “lecture” is itself a work of queer theory and also a queer work (not the same thing) in this double sense. I have already indicated some queer features of Derrida’s discourse in his “lecture,” but two features are especially salient. One is the fact that the “reading” is what Derrida calls a “polylogue” (XXX). It is made up of the give and take of statement and response by an uncertain number of unnamed speakers of uncertain gender, but including one or more speakers explicitly referred to as “elle,” “she.” Others are referred to as “il,” “he.” The speakers disagree constantly, nitpicking over terms, reading procedures, and readings. They cannot all be right. It is, however, impossible to tell which speaker is right, or even which one is speaking at a given time. The result is that Derrida’s discourse is distressingly lacking in a
head or chief logos, a single voice of reason that commands the rest. Socrates has that role in the Platonic dialogues. Derrida’s “lecture” is polylogical. He uses this polylogue technique elsewhere, in “Restitutions” in La verité en peinture, in the “Envois” in La carte postale, in Feu la cendre (Cinders), and in “Sauf le nom.”24 As Derrida says in the preface to La carte postale, “Tu as raison, nous sommes sans doute plusieurs.” (“You are right, doubtless we are several.”)25

The effect of this proliferation of speakers of uncertain gender is disquieting, definitely queer. I can testify to this not only by my reaction to reading Derrida’s “lecture,” but also from my memory of what it was like to hear Derrida present “Restitutions” as seminars at Yale. You quickly lose track of who is speaking. You seem to be hearing an androgynous cacophony of voices. Which are the putatively male, which the female? You cannot tell for certain. Are these really the “several” Derrida’s speaking or just personages he has invented? Most people are used to being able to identify unambiguously the gender of whoever is speaking or writing in a given case. This is an everyday reassurance about gender distinctions. Derrida’s polylogical discourse deconstructs that reassurance, along with gender binaries in general.

One effect of this, at least on me, is to raise questions about my assumptions concerning my own gender. Am I really so unequivocally a heterosexual male as I like to think I am? How would I know for sure? Derrida comments on the way the photographs seem to look at you and to place you in a “subject position” that they generate. This is mimed in the way one of the photos shows one of the women pointing a camera at you, the spectator. This act performs a sovereign “right of inspection” that, it may be, unmans the putatively male spectator. Any one who looks at these

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25. French, 10; English, 6.
Fig. 9: Marie-Françoise Plissart, Droit de regards (1985), photo 76.
photographs, “male” or “female,” becomes willy-nilly part of the game, a pawn in the game of checkers, *le jeu de dames*. The looker becomes the looked at, and, distressingly, loses his or her “*droit de regard*.”

* * *

A concomitant feature of Derrida’s discourse reinforces in spades this queerness. This is the systematic resistance of the “*lecture*,” even any of the separate speeches, to be read as a logical argument or coherent discourse, such as we are taught in school to make any essay we write be. This includes essays in literary criticism. A good essay should have a beginning, middle, and summarizing end, topic sentences, and all the other paraphernalia of “good writing.” Derrida’s “reading” does not fulfill those expectations or obey any of those laws. It does not go neatly from point to point. It spirals all over, with innumerable digressions, partly because the various interlocutors are often quarreling among themselves, even though the “reading” eventually settles down to follow, more or less, the photographic sequences one by one. A teacher of composition would find Derrida’s “*lecture*” most unsatisfactory. It is as if Derrida were self-consciously defying all they taught him in Algeria and France about a good “*explication de texte*,” whether of literary or of philosophical texts. *Glas*, for example, is anything but an acceptable academic treatise about Hegel (left column) or a rule-bound literary critique of Genet (right column). 26 These texts are like games of checkers played by exceedingly peculiar rules that the player makes up as he or she goes along. No doubt a good bit of the resistance to Derrida’s work is outrage at his way of writing. “You can’t do that,” his readers think to themselves.

* * *

The most outrageous and the queerest feature of Derrida’s “*lecture*,” however, if we mean by “queer” the deconstruction of phallogocentrism, is Derrida’s exuberant word play. He tends to stop at almost any word he uses, to jump up and down on it, to twist it this

way and that, until it breaks and plunges the reader into a fathomless abyss of something approximating nonsense, as Walter Benjamin, in “The Task of the Translator,” says Hölderlin’s translations of Sophocles do.27 “[I]n them,” says Benjamin, “meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language.” (“In ihnen stürzt der Sinn von Abgrund zu Abgrund, bis er droht, in bodenlosen Sprachtiefen sich zu verlieren.”)28

Paul de Man’s auditors at his inaugural lecture as a new professor at Yale frowned their disapproval when, referring to the Archie Bunker television series, then popular, he spoke of Derrida as an “archie Debunker,” “a de-bunker of the arché (or origin).”29 The audience was not amused. You just do not do that sort of thing in a solemn academic lecture, perhaps particularly not at Yale, and perhaps particularly not at your inaugural lecture. Some of de Man’s new colleagues, it may be, never forgave him. De Man’s pun, nevertheless, was true to Derrida’s practice, though it was only a faint echo of what Derrida actually does with language, or shows that language does to you, any “you,” however hard you try to use it to say straightforwardly just what you mean. For Derrida, whenever you try to say something unambiguously, you end up also saying something else, or several somethings else. He debunks origins, including the belief that a word has, or ought to have, a single literal, original, head meaning to which all the other meanings are subordinate, mere figurative displacements.

Derrida in his “reading” of Droit de regards commits the stylistic sin of wordplay outrageously on every page. It is one of his

27. David Wills, in his helpful “Translator’s Preface” to the book version of Right of Inspection (101), calls attention to some of these punning sequences, “droit de regards,” “demeure,” “genre,” “générique,” “partie,” “pièce.” Wills also notes the ambiguous play of pronouns and the “polylogical” form of Derrida’s “reading.” Wills’s focus, however, is on the challenges these wordplays present to translation, not on the queer, antiphallogocentric, significance of Derrida’s habit of extravagant wordplay.


ways of showing that phallogocentric discourse is impossible because language itself is irreducibly queer. The reader keeps wanting to say, “Come on, Jacques! Stop it at once. That’s enough, and more than enough. Tell us unequivocally just what you mean to say. No more puns, please. Remember what Samuel Johnson said, ‘He that would make a pun would pick a pocket.’ Puns are theft of the solid currency of good language, a devaluation of that currency.” Derrida wants to show, on the contrary, that you cannot not pun. As soon as you open your mouth, puns proliferate. This proliferation is out of your control. It is a fact about language, not some malicious playing with words.

The first named chair I held at Yale was called the “Neil Gray Professorship of Rhetoric.” Cleanth Brooks had held the chair before me, so it was a great honor to be given that chair when he retired. I asked the then President of Yale, Kingman Brewster, what were the conditions of this chair. He acted a bit as if I were looking a gift horse in the mouth, which I guess I was. Nevertheless, he had someone look it up. It turned out that Neil Gray, bless his heart, endowed a professorship at Yale for someone who would teach students how to expunge metaphors from their language. I was made more than a little anxious by that news. I still have a guilty conscience about not being able to do what I had been appointed to do, even though I know it cannot be done, not even by Cleanth Brooks, much less by me. I also know, however, that Neil Gray was right to be worried. There is something perverse about wordplay and irony. Manly men and womanly women do not make puns. As Samuel Johnson also said, puns were the fatal Cleopatra for whom Shakespeare was willing to sacrifice the whole world, as Mark Antony sacrificed his masculine military might for dalliance with the Egyptian queen, the “serpent of the Nile.”

The French word for “pun” is “calembour.” This is a distinctly odd or queer word to an English-speaker’s ear. Calembour names a homonym, two words that sound the same, or perhaps are the same, but have different meanings. One of the word’s roots is “bourde,” which means “a lie used to abuse or play with someone”; “a heavy gross fault;” “a gaffe”; a “bourdon.” A “bourdon” is, among other things, a printer’s omission of words from a text being set. A “faux bourdon” is the male of a beehive. That returns us to gender difference, after a wild goose chase of pun after pun buried just in
the final syllable of “calembour.” The French word for pun is itself a complex pun, even putting aside the initial syllable “cal-,” which may mean “wise,” “instructed,” “difficult,” or “stall.” Derrida notes “je cale” in “Télépathie” means: “I’m stalled, stuck, unable to move forward.”

Does that mean a calembour is a grossly mistaken use of a word that stops you from going any further with what you are saying? Derrida’s puns often work to stop forward movement by creating a whirlpool of comment on a word that he has used in a perfectly idiomatic expression. Once Derrida begins speculating about a given innocent word, he deviates perversely for sentence after sentence rather than getting on with it.

I am using the word “pun” to name all the wordplay in Derrida’s “reading,” all those places where he uses a word in more than one sense, or calls attention to the multiple and contradictory meanings of a given word in French. William Empson’s admirable The Structure of Complex Words implies by using the word “structure” in its title that complex words are likely have a rational structure in their multiple meanings, perhaps with a single literal meaning and a complexity of subordinate derived meanings. For Derrida a complex word most likely has no such rational structure. Such words, and they abound, just have a bewildering multiplicity of different irreconcilable meanings. Extravagant puns or plays on words make up the constant texture of Derrida’s “reading.” I am claiming that this is an anti-phallogocentric feature, that is, a queer feature, in what Derrida writes. This is the case both in his essay for Droit de regards and throughout his work, whatever he happens to be talking about.

I have already given examples of calembours in Derrida, for example the way “dame” can mean both a “lady” and a piece in the game called “jeu de dames.” The phrase “droit de regards,” as I have also demonstrated, has several not entirely compatible meanings for

30. “Télépathie,” 230; “Telepathy,” 242. See my The Medium is the Maker (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2009), 28-9, for a discussion of the way “caler” is part of a long string of words in “c” and “I” in “Télépathie” that includes “Claude,” the name, as already noted, that one of Derrida’s interlocutors in his “lecture” gives to one of the women in Droits de regards.

Derrida. “Genre” can mean a kind of art form (like “novel,” “poem,” “photo-novel,” or “reading”), but it can also mean “gender.” “Genre” is related to another word that Derrida plays games with in his “reading”: “générique.” To an English or American speaker that use of the word seems extremely queer. It looks like it ought to mean “generic,” belonging to the genus, the general, not the specific, as in “generic drug.” In one of its senses “générique” does mean this, but its main meaning in Droit de regards is to label the “credits” or “trailer” at the beginning and end of the book, that is, the list of names of the photographer, those in charge of scenario and montage, and all the actresses, the one actor, and others, including Derrida, who have participated in making this book. The term is borrowed from French film language and reapplied to the photo-novel. The “Générique” at the end gives credit to those who have generated the book. It repeats the list already given at the beginning, though there the word “générique” is missing. That word’s reference to generation in the sense of “creating,” “making,” partly by way of its cross-reference to “genre,” also has a sexual meaning. It can refer to the act of generation. Derrida uses it to name initial photographs that generate a sequence, for example the one on the cover of two intertwined “women” on a big mattress on the floor of a huge formal room. (Fig. 3) The cover photo generates the initial sequence of apparent lesbian lovemaking, though it is also part of that sequence. Another “générique” is the photograph at a distance of the two young girls fully clothed playing le jeu des dames, French checkers, in an echo with a difference of the cover photo. (Fig. 4) Derrida also claims that all one hundred of the photos are “génériques,” that is, the starting places of further moves in the jeu de dames, in more than one sense, that make up the whole set of photographs.

Puns are everywhere in the “lecture.” Tracking them all down would require a virtually endless process of word by word reading on my part. The entire texture of the “lecture” is pervaded and permeated with self-conscious wordplay.

The opening pages, for example, begin with some give and take about the French word “histoire,” as opposed to “discours,” about a story that is “raconté,” about a “récit,” or “narrative,” or about “l’inénarrable,” the “unnarratable,” which the photographs in their sequences are said to be (I). One of the speakers then on the next page warns another to play the game, to stay within the rules,
to be bound by the frames or squares. He or she does that by saying something perfectly idiomatic in French, though it sounds odd to an American ear: “Je te mets en demeure . . .” (II). (“I put you on notice.”) That leads to a couple of wild pages in which those French words are turned this way and that. “Demeure” may mean a mansion, such as those in which many of the photographs were taken. “Mise en demeure,” and just “demeure,” and just “mise,” however, have all sorts of punning meanings. “Demeure,” for example, can mean “hold still,” said to the “subject” when you are about to snap a photo. “Mise en demeure” in French means “order of placement.” It is also a legal term meaning putting a hold on something so it can be officially inspected, or a summons to perform such and such. A “demeure,” according to Littré, the authoritative French dictionary, cited in extenso by one of Derrida’s speakers, is “a delay, the time that exceeds the limit within which one is required to do something (III).”32 These meanings are not too far from the corresponding English word “demur,” which means “to take exception,” “to enter or interpose a demurrer” (legal), and “to delay.” The head swims and the mind boggles or demurs, but Derrida is not yet through. One speaker runs through a long series of different things that the “mise” in “mise en demeure” can mean, all variations on “pose, position, supposition, the place of each subject” (III).

In one case this penchant for wordplay is highlighted and commented on, unfavorably, by one of Derrida’s interlocutors. He or she accuses another speaker not only of a penchant for puns or “équivoques,” but even of falling for the illusion of a single head meaning of which all the other meanings are figurative transfer. That other speaker plays on “develop” and “development” as naming both bringing out with chemicals a photographic negative (in a now obsolete technology) and, at the same time, in good Aristotelian terminology, the progress of a narrative. Another speaker criticizes

— You exploit too many equivocal words, “development” for example. You use it in the sense, among others, of photographic technicity (film, negative, print), as if photography allowed you to speak literally about it and figuratively about everything else. And what if you were to say “one develops the photograph one has taken . . . .” (XV in the French)

The other speaker answers not by denying this, but by extending the pun or “équivoque”: “Comme on prend des dames, en somme, et des dames en photographie” (XV). (“In effect, the way one takes pieces in checkers, the way women are taken by photography” [XIV in the English].) In this formulation, “prend des dames” can mean, all at once and at the same time, to take women sexually, to take the pieces called “dames” in the French checkers game called “le jeu dames,” and to take photographs of women. As you to see, there is no limit to Derrida’s penchant for puns and to his quick invention of various quite different senses in which a given quite ordinary word, “prend” (“take”) in this case, can be used in different contexts.

In another place, one of Derrida’s speakers takes the two innocent letters, “Ph,” and spins out a whole sequence of words this acronym can stand for, bringing together in one phoneme various not entirely compatible regions of his discourse: “Au lieu de pays [that is, the strange country to which the photographs transport the viewer], il faudrait formaliser, dire le Ph: ce qu’il est indifférent d’appeler phainesthai [“to appear” in Greek] ou phos [“light” in Greek], phénomène, phantasme, fantôme ou photographie” (XXI). (“It should be possible to formalize this not in terms of a pays [“pronounced “pe(j)i,” like the French letters p and i,” as Wills observes in his notes] but rather as the Ph., referring indiscriminately to the phainesthai or phos, phenomenon, phantasm, phantom, or photography.”)

In another give and take between two speakers, various puns on the word “tirer,” “draw,” and related words are drawn out. “Se retire” means “withdraw” or “retract.” “Tiré” means “printed.” “Attirée” means “attracted.” A chest of drawers figures in the photo-
graphs, as I noted earlier, and is an allusion to the French idiom, “récit à tiroirs.” The drawers are pulled open (“se tirent”) (XXIV).

Here, in conclusion, is one of the most explicit basket-full of puns in the whole text, as well as the most explicit analysis of their functioning. That will be enough, and more than enough, in this linguistic game in which each pun begets others, in an endless excessive proliferation punctuating Derrida’s discourse with undecidabilities of meaning that point back to the secret that may not be a secret.

That secret, if there is one, lurks at the center, what Derrida calls “le pays-O” (“the country O”) (XX). This is the place of the wholly other that is both revealed and hidden by the circulation in both directions of the 100 photographs. “Le pays-O,” of course, also has a sexual meaning, as do so many of Derrida’s puns. Think of Heinrich von Kleist’s “Die Marquise von O” as an analogue for the sexual meaning of that “O.” Puns seem to have a secret attraction for sexual innuendo. Here is what one “Derrida” of indeterminate sex has to say about “partie,” in stern accusation of another of the Derridas. It is also an admirable summing up of Derrida’s queer practice with words in this essay and in his work generally. That may justify making a final long citation. Wills’s translation interpolates the key words in French:

— you are not content to name, you also give titles to each subject. For some time now all you have done is repeat “you see her depart,” “she leaves the room [la pièce].” You play on the meaning of all these words—the parts of the body, particularly the private parts, the partie de dames, the part of a whole, the party to a dispute, those who depart and who thus become all those other part(ie)s, and all that in a room [pièce] which is also a play [pièce de théâtre], a bedchamber or camera, and a piece in checkers. You make partie into an essential piece of the play [une pièce essentielle de la pièce] and pièce into a part of the game [une partie de la partie], not to mention the other words whose various implications you exploit—there have been so many of them recently. You lead one to believe this photographic masterpiece merely develops a lexicon, as if it were “revealing” what exists invisibly in certain powerful words. That would amount to the most effective of silent
metadiscourses, operating, for example, through these two words and several others, setting before us their syntax, their play, their ruses and simulacra. The words remain as negatives, but they are indeed photographed by this sort of rebus. One only needs to immerse them in the sympathetic fluid of your developer, and then fix them on the page. Contrary to what you’ve said up until now, this is really an homage to the word and to rhetoric, a right of inspection accorded the word, which remains therefore as that which was in the beginning. (XX)

To this play on words in “part,” I add that the neatly typed little slip of paper inserted in the copy of Droit de regards reads: “De la part de Jacques Derrida.” The gift was “on Jacques Derrida’s part.” To the forceful reproach I have just cited, the accused, unrepentant, but, as always, with something to say, answers with the riposte already cited in part. S/he asserts that these photographs are in French:

— Not so much a homage to the spoken word [parole] as to language [langue]. [This is a reference to Saussure’s distinction between “langue” (a language as it is in itself, with all its rules) and “parole” (a given use of that language by a particular speaker to say something or other)]. For if I follow you, this photographic masterpiece would be bound by a secret agreement to the original resources of a particular language, namely French. (XX)

Well, enough, and more than enough, of Derrida’s puns. They make me dizzy, as if I were circling around in a whirlpool or maelstrom, or hanging over an abyss leading down to the Country of O.

* * *

I conclude this preposterously long preface with a summary, as all proper essays should (for I am not so defiant as Derrida of the rules). I have sincerely praised the essays in this book. I have then contributed to them by proposing a reading of Derrida’s “reading” of Marie-Françoise Plissart’s and Benoît Peeters’s Droit de regards.
Both the photographs and Derrida’s commentary are, I have shown, works of queer theory and queer works. I add one final thing, however. One of Derrida’s personages speaks in one place of the way the photographs generate the desire to tell more stories. Those stories “arise, they grow within you like desire itself, they invade you” (II in the English; III in the French). Reading Derrida’s “lecture” and looking at Plissart’s photographs have had a similar effect on me. They have generated a desire to tell more stories, both in helpless submission to their power and as an apotropaic attempt, not entirely successful, to protect myself from that power, to ward it off.