Impossible Uncanniness:
Deconstruction and Queer Theory

Nicholas Royle

What can this ciphered letter signify, my very sweet destiny, my immense, my very near unknown one? Perhaps this: even if it is still more mysterious, I owe it to you to have discovered homosexuality, and ours is indestructible.

—Jacques Derrida

Queer’s not just a queer word but belongs, if it belongs, to a queer time. I would like to think of that sentence as a tiny installation, a snowflake of sound, around which one might take one or more queer turns, or sketch a few queer footnotes. There is, perhaps, a queer theory of the First Sentence. In a dreamy, radical passivity, I imagined an encounter of “deconstruction and queer theory” in relation to the writings of Leo Bersani, starting with the falling into place of the First Sentence. What is the character of a first sentence? How, along what paths and with what effects, does the tone adopt you as much as you it (to borrow Derrida’s formulation)? How does it commit or even (in the strongest sense) determine you? Bersani is fascinated by what happens, like lightning, by what is struck or striking in first sentences. “There is a big secret about sex: most people don’t like it.” “The vagina is a logical defect in nature.”

“Psychoanalytically speaking, monogamy is cognitively inconceivable

and morally indefensible.”5 These are three of his first sentences, the opening words of “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” “Merde alors” (an essay co-authored with Ulysse Dutoit), and “Against Monogamy,” respectively. I could envisage devoting a separate essay to each of these sentences, in homage to the thinker who, it seems to me, first elaborated, a good while before Judith Butler and others, the theoretical and political dimensions of deconstruction and queer theory.6 But in the limited time I have here, this will have to be signalled as a bypath—a bypath that inevitably takes in Billy Budd, a path by Billy, a billy by-blow, proceeding and even coming into bud, by way of the opening of Chapter 4 of that masterpiece in which Melville’s narrator declares: “In this matter of writing, resolve as one may to keep to the main road, some paths have an enticement not readily to be withstood. I am going to err into such a bypath. If the reader will keep me company I shall be glad. At the least, we can promise ourselves that pleasure which is wickedly said to be in sinning, for a literary sin the divergence will be.”7 Does Billy Budd have a main road? What would it mean to keep its narrator company? How should we construe the pleasure of literary sinning and what might be discovered on its bypaths?

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“Queer’s a queer word”: that is a quotation, as some might recognize, from two men, co-authors, indulgers or “collaborators,” as Wayne Koestenbaum calls them, in “doubletalk” or “double writing.”8 Who came out with this phrase (and so doing deliberately omitted

7. Herman Melville, “Billy Budd, Sailor,” in Melville’s Short Novels, ed. Dan McCall (New York: Norton, 2002), 103; here 113. For Billy Budd as “by-blow,” see 110; for the suggestive instance of a “budding pink,” see 170. Further page references to this text are given parenthetically as BB.
the quotation marks around queer)? Is it to be read or heard in the voice of Andrew Bennett or of his co-author? Of an authorial double-voice or double-double-voice? Queer is instilled at the very quick of quotation, queer would be in the ear, like a bypath in the voice. It falls outside the scope of this essay to discuss my love of Andrew Bennett, or my collaboration with him. But no doubt, as in the case of Billy Budd, I shall be addressing this, even or especially when I appear not to be doing so, or when I am most firmly convinced that I am not doing so, tacitly immersed in the kinds of logic and experience that Kostenbaum discusses in his fascinating book about “the erotics of male literary collaboration,” starting with his contention that “double authorship attacks not primarily our dogmas of literary propriety, but of sexual propriety” (DT 8-9), and examining how, for example in the case of the novel called Romance (1903) that Joseph Conrad wrote in collaboration with Ford Madox Hueffer (almost twenty years his junior), double-writing entails a queer mixing of voices or rather (as I would like to designate it here) a magical thinking writing in which voice is queer. Koestenbaum quotes the narrator Kemp recalling his sense of being one “I” and simultaneously another, Kemp’s queerly unkempt self-division in the act of speaking: “in a queer way, the thoughts of the one ‘I’ floated through into the words of the other.”

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Queer belongs, if it belongs, to a queer time. In a number of texts, perhaps most notably “Freud and the Scene of Writing” and Archive Fever, Jacques Derrida suggests that one of Freud’s greatest discoveries is, or was, or will have been, Nachträglichkeit, deferred

effect, delayed action, delayed or deferred sense or meaning, after-
effect or effect of deferral, deferred event, event in deferral, and so
on. It seems to me that comparatively little has been made of this
discovery, as yet, in the context of queer theory. Deferred effect is,
I just said, or was or will have been and even, I would like to add,
might be, one of Freud’s most extraordinary and most disruptive
discoveries, still might be, might have been or might be. There is a
necessary might that, I think, comes into play or comes out here,
as if by a mole-like progression, through the supplementing of
Derrida’s reading of Freud (in “Freud and the Scene of Writing” and
Archive Fever, for example) with his reading of Hélène Cixous and
the “might” of literature (in later texts such as H.C. for Life and
Geneses, Genealogies, Genres and Genius). I am referring here to
what Derrida says about “the strange tense of [the] puise [might] or
puissiez-vous [would that you might]” (HC 60) that is to be found,
in an exemplary fashion, in the writings of Cixous. It is the question
of a strange tense, a mighty optative that “would attest to unpower,
vulnerability, death,” even as it affirms a certain omnipotence, an
omnipotence that is “in league with the im-possible” and that
“would do the impossible,” in short an optative that would respond
to the fact that “desire [can] reach where the distinction between
phantasm and the so-called actual or external reality does not yet
take place and has no place to be” (HC 107-108). This “might,”
I would like to suggest, is intimately related to what Cixous and
Derrida have to say about sexual differences in the plural, to their
singular but shared affirmations of the polysexual, “a sexuality
without number” (as Derrida calls it), “beyond the binary
difference that governs the decorum of all codes, beyond the
opposition feminine/masculine, beyond bisexuality as well, beyond
homosexuality and heterosexuality which come to the same thing.”

Milesi and Stefan Herbrechter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006);
hereafter cited in the text as HC; ibid., Geneses, Genealogies, Genres and
Genius: The Secrets of the Archive, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic (Edinburgh:
Edinburgh University Press, 2006).
University Press, 1995), 108.
Here’s an apparently straightforward, if not straight, example of deferred effect or event in deferral. In an essay published in *Radical Philosophy* in 2000 called, “Wishful Theory and Sexual Politics,” originally given as a talk at a conference (the same year) entitled, “30 years of Radical Politics and Philosophy,” Jonathan Dollimore reflects on the state of queer theory, writing as follows:

The more fashionable Queer became, the more it was appropriated by those who wanted to be fashionable and the more inclusive and meaningless the term became. As I write, an anthology of literary theory arrives on my desk which reprints work of mine as representative of queer theory even though that work was written before queer was a glint in anyone’s eye. A few days before that another book arrived, an introduction to the work of E.M. Forster, in which the author, Nick Royle, boldly explores the idea that Forster wrote not one queer novel but six. Somehow Nick, I don’t think so. But then, when the deco boys start to out-queer queer, maybe it’s time to move on.  

For me, the deferred effect here consists, first of all, perhaps, in the fact that I only became aware of Dollimore’s essay some five years after it was published. If you thought you were queer, even a little bit, if you thought what you were writing was queer, even a little bit, or even if you thought only that you were writing about queer, if you were hoping or imagining (the cheek!) that you might have had some very slight contribution to make to elaborating on the nature of queer or queer theory, for example in the context of Forster’s work and the relationship between queer and literature staged there, you were wrong, boy. But the scene and logic of deferred effect is even more complicated. Indeed, as with the question of how one translates *Nachträglichkeit* into English, it is about irreducible multiplicity from the beginning.

Queer’s a queer time. Jonathan Dollimore testifies to this in more than one way, and not only when he appears to resist or reject it. Thus, for example, towards the end of his essay, he will explicitly propose that “desire, and perverse desire most acutely, is at once an effect of history, and a refusal of history” (WT 22). It is, of course, part of the purpose of Andrew Bennett and the other man’s account of the queerness of queer in their chapter entitled, “Queer” (first published in the second edition of their book, in 1999, though presumably without Dollimore’s knowledge), to suggest that “the entry of the word ‘queer’ into the English language is itself a study in the queer ways of words,” and to explore what they call the delay—the “delay of more than four hundred years between the introduction of the ‘odd’ or ‘singular’ sense of the word into English and the introduction of its ‘homosexual’ sense,” in other words, from the first recorded use of “queer” (“Heir cumis awin quir Clerk” in William Dunbar in 1508) to its alleged first “homosexual” use (where, as the authors note, the word “queer” is, a little queerly, already in quotation marks) in a US government report published in 1922 (Q 178). It’s as if this “delay” that they talk about was a feature of its usage from the beginning, as if for example pre-1922 writing (such as that of Forster, Conrad, Henry James and numerous others, going back at least as far, as we shall see, as Gerard Manley Hopkins) were concerned with establishing in advance the need to read “queer” in quotation marks. The word “queer,” says the OED, is “of doubtful origin,” and this is effectively also, as the dictionary goes on to note, one of its primary meanings: i.e., “Strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric, in appearance or character. Also, of questionable character, suspicious, dubious” (sense 1a). There can be no queer theory, we might say, without doubtful origin.

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Dollimore’s prose is rich and suggestive, not least in its apparent colloquialism and simplicity. Let us consider, for example, his reference to the anthology that, after the fact, by deferral, reprints some of his work “as representative of queer theory even though that work was written before queer was a glint in anyone’s eye.” In this reworking of the phallo-paternal, heterosexual, reproductive “twinkle” into the “glint” that is more readily associated with the
killer or with sheer lust, Dollimore’s writing intimates a compelling priority of the body or of physical gesture: “Queer” begins in the eye of a beholder; in the beginning was the glint. At the same time, he also appears to want to argue for a sense of history, an orderliness and chronologism, which queer, starting perhaps with the queer history of the word itself, queues the pitch of. Not insignificantly, this double gesture (the glint and the logocentric, rectilinearist affirmation of history) is subordinate, in Dollimore’s sentence, to the strange time of writing: “As I write, an anthology of literary theory arrives on my desk which reprints . . . .” The writing, the arriving, and even the reprinting all seem to come together in the present, or at least under that sort of “false appearance of a present” that Derrida so resonantly evokes in the opening pages of “Outwork” in Dissemination, apropos the drawing-everything-together time of a preface.  

But who am I to talk? I’m so last week (and this was already years ago). “A few days before that another book arrived, an introduction to the work of E. M. Forster, in which the author, Nick Royle, boldly explores . . . .” I like that “that” (“A few days before that”), as if Nick Royle arrived before writing, avant la lettre. Anyway, apparently (it was in the late 90s, let’s remember) I wanted to be fashionable and therefore I appropriated “Queer.” To quote Dollimore again: “the more fashionable Queer became, the more it was appropriated by those who wanted to be fashionable and the more inclusive and meaningless the term became.” Is “queer” meaningless? What does it mean to say that a word, or a concept, a proper name even (for Dollimore here gives “Queer” a capital letter), becomes more “meaningless”? What is the relation here between “meaningless” and “inclusive” or, conversely perhaps, meaning and the exclusive? Without launching off into a full-scale Limited Inc kind of response here, I would just like to suggest that, if there is or was something “fashionable” about “Queer,” this had nothing to do with any effort on my part and, moreover, I do not believe that it is possible to appropriate anything in writing, not least when it has a capital letter, whether it be a theory or an autobiography

or one’s own so-called proper name. In writing, as in any work of identification, however personal or political or personal-as-political (as people used to say), whether construed as love of oneself or of the other, the very movement of appropriation is an expropriation, as Derrida makes lovingly clear in text after text. Deconstruction (if there is any) is what cannot be appropriated: it is the undoing of any movement of appropriation.

It’s not a matter (as many early critical commentaries in the 1970s and 1980s supposed) of deconstruction as the blank rejection of “presence,” a dismissal of the desire for appropriation, or of feelings of identification or “belonging.” It’s a matter of rendering these things “enigmatic” (as Of Grammatology explicitly states)17 with a view to their being thought and activated otherwise: this is what is going on in Derrida’s interest in what Limited Inc calls “‘literatures’ or ‘revolutions’ that as yet have no model.”18 Deconstruction, if there is any, is first of all a deconstruction of the spontaneous, of what is supposedly immediate or of one’s own free will. In this respect, Derrida’s work has an affiliation with Lenin’s. As Lenin nicely puts it, in a chapter entitled “The Spontaneity of the Masses and the Consciousness of the Social-Democrats” in What Is To Be Done? (1901): “There is spontaneity and spontaneity.”19

19. V. I. Lenin, What Is To Be Done? (www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/ii.htm#v05fl61h-373-GUESS). In note 16 to this chapter, Lenin writes: “It is often said that the working class spontaneously gravitates towards socialism. This is perfectly true in the sense that socialist theory reveals the causes of the misery of the working class more profoundly and more correctly than any other theory, and for that reason the workers are able to assimilate it so easily, provided, however, this theory does not itself yield to spontaneity, provided it subordinates spontaneity to itself. Usually this is taken for granted, but it is precisely this which Rabocheye Dyelo forgets or distorts. The working class spontaneously gravitates towards socialism; nevertheless, most widespread (and continuously and diversely revived) bourgeois ideology spontaneously imposes itself upon the working class to a still greater degree.”
There is a thread to be followed here in regard to what Derrida refers to as “a sort of crypto-communist legacy” in deconstruction. Deconstruction, he notes, inherits something of the “condemnation of ‘spontaneism’” in Lenin. As he summarizes in a discussion with Maurizio Ferraris in 1994: “what remains constant in my thinking is a critique of institutions, but one that sets out not from the utopia of a wild and spontaneous pre- or non-institution, but rather from counter-institutions. . . . The idea of a counter-institution, neither spontaneous, wild, nor immediate, is the most permanent motif that . . . has guided me in my work.”

Permit me, here, simply to signal the importance of the question of queer theory and counter-institutions, and the indissociable links, in my view, between deconstruction, queer, and a certain communism. It’s a question also of spectrality, and I will try to say a little more about this shortly. Suffice to recall for the moment Derrida’s remark about communism in *Spectres of Marx*: “communism has always been and will remain spectral: it is always still to come and is distinguished, like democracy itself, from every living present understood as plenitude of a presence-to-itself, as totality of a presence effectively identical to itself.”

Derrida’s “crypto-communist legacy,” as he calls it, also entails another thinking of the “crypto-,” of the hidden and secret. There is spontaneity and spontaneity, but there is also always going to be a secret of “me” for “me.” This notion of the secret is crucial to the hesitation I have been trying to mark vis-à-vis the time to which queer belongs, if it belongs. Queer would have to do with a queering of time as such, and with a deconstructive thinking

of the secret as what “does not belong.” It’s not a question of appropriation, but rather of the experience of its impossibility. It’s not a question of spontaneity, but of reckoning with the argument (already explicit in *Of Grammatology*) that “immediacy is derived” (OG 157). As Derrida writes of the logic of deferred effect, delayed sense, or *Nachträglichkeit*: “The temporality to which [Freud] refers cannot be that which lends itself to a phenomenology of consciousness or of presence and one may indeed wonder by what right all that is in question here should still be called time [or now or delay, etc.]” (OG 67; my emphasis). Insofar as it is a question of affirming one’s identity (I am queer, or I am a queer, I will have been or I might be queer, and so on), it is also one of attending to the secrecy and non-belonging that structure all movements of identification. As Derrida says in *A Taste for the Secret*: “The desire to belong to any community whatsoever, the desire for belonging *tout court*, implies that one does not belong. . . . Accounting for one’s belonging—be it on national, linguistic, political or philosophical grounds—in itself implies a not-belonging” (TS 28). Derrida wants to affirm not-belonging, in part because “belonging,” “the fact of avowing one’s belonging” or “putting in common,” in his terms, “spells the loss of the secret” (TS 59). As he says in a related essay, “Passions: ‘An Oblique Offering’”: “There is something secret. But it does not conceal itself. . . . It remains inviolable even when one thinks one has revealed it. . . . It does not belong therefore to the truth, neither to the truth as homoiosis or adequation, nor to the promised truth, nor to the inaccessible truth.” This secrecy is at issue every instant, and in every word. One name for it might be “queer.”

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Permit me to add one or two further remarks concerning the passage I quoted from Jonathan Dollimore: “[Royle’s book] boldly explores

the idea that Forster wrote not one queer novel but six. Somehow Nick, I don’t think so. But then, when the deco boys start to out-queer queer, maybe it’s time to move on.” It really does look as if Dollimore doesn’t approve, even if he expresses this in a touching gesture, at once patronizing and affectionate as well as comical, of turning aside from his discourse in order to address me directly: “Somehow Nick. . . .” Boldly, but apparently quite erroneously, trying to explore the idea that Forster wrote not one but six queer novels, I am labelled a “deco boy.” I must admit it makes me smile, this performative moment, this embedded act of naming whereby I become a “deco boy.” What do deco boys do? Do they get to meet deco girls or do they only meet other deco boys? Or do they get up to something else? And are there deco men as well as deco boys? Was Derrida a deco man or just another deco boy? And what would be the relation between a deco boy and a deco man, or between one deco boy and another (perhaps you, my love), before or beyond, before and beyond all thinking of the filial or homo-fraternal? No one, so far as I know, has ever called me a deco boy before or since, and as the years go by the chances of it happening again no doubt continue to recede. Am I, was I, will I have been a “deco boy”? Supposing that “deco” refers principally not to “deco” (as in art deco) or to “decko” (as in having a quick look, possibly with a glint in one’s eye) or to “decoy” (despite its perhaps special aptness and allure in this context) but to “deconstruction,” I wonder about the relationship between “deconstruction” and “queer theory” that is being suggested here. It looks, at least at first decko, as if it would be antagonistic, even oppositional: “But then, when the deco boys start to out-queer queer, maybe it’s time to move on.”

I need to step sideways here, or at least note a footnote, which I believe helps to illuminate the passage in question. It comes after the sentence about Forster writing “not one queer novel but six.” There’s a footnote following “six” in which Dollimore quotes me as saying, in the Introduction to my book: “I hope to establish a sense of Forster’s novels not only as queer . . . but also . . . queerer than queer.”

witty sentence, in which my book is summarily dismissed (six words for a reading of six novels), is also, as far as I am aware, the only thing that anyone has ever said in print about this book, at least as a reading of Forster and “queer.” So, in some ways, I can only be grateful. But it is also a pity, I think, that this critic couldn’t have taken a little longer over the reading and, perhaps, over his assessment. First he tells me “I don’t think so,” but then he says but then: “But then, when the deco boys start to out-queer queer, maybe it’s time to move on.” This rather curious “but then” is more or less directly followed by another. For Dollimore, at this point, ends the paragraph and begins a new section under the heading “Out-queering,” which begins with another kind of “but then,” this time in the form of the phrase “Except that.” He writes: “Except that out-queering was always an aspect of queer, especially in relation to perversion” (WT 19). In this way his text appears to gesture in two directions—an outflanking of the “deco boy,” on the one hand, and on the other a lingering (as if uncomfortable or inadvertent) suggestion that there is something to be affirmed about deconstructive thinking in this context, specifically regarding its focus on the hyperbolic or exorbitant, its attention to how queer, perhaps, always already exceeds itself, or is indeed generated out of this very logic of out-queering. One might reasonably expect a critic as astute as Jonathan Dollimore candidly to acknowledge this, but his work’s relationship with deconstruction remains uneasy: I have written elsewhere regarding its avoidance or elision of deconstructive questions.26

So there is something about queer that out-queers itself: this “was always an aspect of queer.” Queer cruises new senses and directions and continues to alter. As Judith Butler notes in Bodies That Matter, in a passage that I also cite in the book on Forster:

If the term “queer” is to be a site of collective contestations,

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the point of departure for a set of historical considerations and future imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes.27

I cannot explore in detail the more intricate or twisted and perhaps unsettling dimensions of Butler’s argument here except to note that “queer theory” would have to do with deferred effect and the incalculable, with what cannot be “anticipated in advance,” as she puts it; and indeed that this can and must include the possibility of the disappearance or obsolescence of the term “queer” itself (Butler BM, 228). This logic of deferred sense and the incalculable, of disappearing and spectrality, is, I think, one of the ways in which deconstruction and queer theory can be aligned or even be seen to merge into one another. In this context, there is perhaps a further irony in Dollimore’s remarks, namely, that Nicholas Royle’s book on E. M. Forster contains not a single reference either to Derrida or to deconstruction. “Deco boys,” you can spot them a mile off: go figure.

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“A sudden lurch” (Melville BB, 125): it’s off, it’s by, it’s across the path, veering.28 “The greasy liquid streamed just across [the] path” (BB 125) of Claggart, the master-at-arms. Over and over, apparently off at a tangent, coming back to this climactic spillage, for instance, with a couple of sentences about passion at the start of

28. [For more on “veering,” see Nicholas Royle, Veering: A Theory of Literature (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2011), esp. 5-8, where Royle lists many words related to the Latin verb *vertere* (“to turn”), including: “veer,” “verse,” “version,” “subvert,” “pervert,” and “vertigo.” One of Royle’s points is that “veering is intricately entwined with the emergence and history of what we call ‘queer.’ However you may want to think about it, veering is not straight. To focus on veering in literature (and beyond) is to engage with new and perhaps unexpected, even unheard-of orientations” (8).—Ed.]
Billy Budd, Chapter 13: “Passion, and passion in its profoundest, is not a thing demanding a palatial stage whereon to play its part. Down among the groundlings, among the beggars and rakers of the garbage, profound passion is enacted” (BB 130). It’s mourning, top of the mourning, highest mourning, as of the beautiful queer butterflies, or *papillons*, Derrida writes about in his “Circumfession,” their colorings “a mélange of black and white,” with you I go down, by you, yes, neither to the woods nor Buckingham Palace, but to the municipal tip, delirious dog-days of blazing sun and streaming grief to do and have done it, we eye the totter in a *folie à deux*, following flowing towards this soiled sublime blond rugged agelessly old-young creature of the dump transfixing us as we make love to his presence totting an account as if suddenly able to see shadowing sweating heaving in the blistering heat of a fire neither of us can put out, to semen the portmanteau, coming in voice, “homosexual ventriloquy” (C 160), as Derrida calls it, high writing cementing, seeing men at sea, panting from the foretop, our Billy Budd, the one with whom we come, in secret, every time.

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In *E. M. Forster*, I argue that homosexuality and queerness constitute a crucial aspect of all of Forster’s novels: in this, despite Jonathan Dollimore’s “I don’t think so,” I am not claiming anything particularly controversial, or even new. A significant collection of essays entitled *Queer Forster* had already appeared in 1997. In the case of *The Longest Journey*, for example, I examine what I refer to as “all its queer coding, switching and multiplying of sexual identities” (EMF 32). (In passing I would just remark that if *The Longest Journey* isn’t a queer novel, we are still in need of inventing a critical language to respond to it. This takes us in the direction of what I tentatively refer to as “queerer than queer,” which would include

above all perhaps questions of telepathy and spectrality, especially as these pertain to the anonymous, affective, burrowing, tugging strangeness of identification and disidentification in literary fiction. My text is a modest attempt to explore the sense that Forster is at once cannier and uncannier than readers generally give him credit for. There is, if you will, a Forsterian “I don’t think so” addressed to every one of his readers, waiting in the wings. This is related to the sort of mindgameful, cryptic, mole-like curiosity that is evident, for example, in a Forster diary entry from 25 October 1910: “To work out: The sexual bias in literary criticism . . . What sort of person would the critic prefer to sleep with, in fact.” End of tautological parenthesis. I try to elucidate what seems to me a Freudian aspect of Forster’s work, or at least the Freud who declares in his 1919 essay on Leonardo da Vinci:

Everyone, even the most normal person, is capable of making a homosexual object-choice, and has done so at some time in his life, and either still adheres to it in his unconscious or else protects himself against it by vigorous counter-attitudes.

On this basis, I contend not only that “all men are queer,” but, more specifically, that that queerness has to do with a time that may never be consciously experienced, a time that doesn’t belong. I seek to illustrate this in various ways, and, indeed, to let it (however anachronistically or deferrentially) come out in the writing, as a way of trying to countersign what I believe pervades Forster’s.

By way of a brief example, I would like to turn, not to one

33. I picture the copy-editor, and then perhaps the reader, who thinks that there was an error in this sentence, supposing “deferrentially” to be a spelling mistake. Elsewhere I hope to elaborate a more extensive account of this queer-looking neologism.
of the novels (which constituted the focus of my earlier work) but to one of Forster’s short stories, his unpublishable “sexy stories” as he called them (I 16). “Ansell” (written probably in 1903) is narrated by a 23-year-old man called Edward who is supposed to be writing “a dissertation on the Greek optative.” 34 Forster’s marvellous little text works and plays with, along and through the bypaths of this word “optative,” defined in two principal current senses in the OED as “adj. Grammar. Having the function of expressing wish or desire” (sense 1); and “Relating to choice, or expressing desire; relating to the future and to the decisions it involves” (sense 2a). The 23-year-old has just a month in which to complete his dissertation, and then he’ll get “a Fellowship” (A 29) (those were the days). He leaves Cambridge to stay with his cousin in the country, accompanied by a hefty box containing the relevant books and a mass of notes—“editions interleaved and annotated, and pages and pages of cross-references and criticisms of rival theories” (A 30). “The optative,” as the narrator puts it, “does not admit of very flowing treatment” (A 30). On this visit to his cousin’s, the main focus of Edward’s attention is Ansell, the former “garden and stable boy” (A 28), “now gamekeeper . . . and only occasional gardener and groom” (A 29). In their youth, the narrator tells us, they had been “on the most intimate footing” (A 28). As Ansell drives him from the railway station, along a road high above a river, the horse is sent wild by “clegs” and, in the ensuing “bang[ing]” and “back[ing]” and “crack[ing]” (A 31), the box containing the narrator’s books and thesis-notes slides and falls “into the abyss,” breaking open “like a water-lily,” disseminating its contents down “through the trees into the river” (A 32). They try to recover them but, as the narrator puts it, “of the unfinished dissertation and the essential notes there was not a sign” (A 34).

So much for academic life. The story concludes: “Whenever we pass the place Ansell looks over and says ‘Them books!’ and laughs, and I laugh too as heartily as he, for I have not yet realized what has happened” (A 35). It is this extraordinary final sentence that, to my mind, most resists “flowing treatment.” In a bizarre,

impossible present, it conjoins what narratologists call a pseudo-
iterative ("Whenever we pass the place"), a sense that this happens
on numerous occasions and yet it is just this one time, with a shared
laughter that is attributed to a future that has not yet happened, that
cannot yet have happened: “I laugh too as heartily as he, for I have
not yet realized what has happened.” This is not so much the “not
yet” of homoerotic friendship at the end of *A Passage to India*, but
rather the strange “would have,” “might have” and even, in the same
sweeping moment, “did” and “do” of *Maurice*, in particular of
Clive’s cryptic turn to apparent heterosexuality at the end of that
novel, marked by his perception of Maurice’s departure on the last
page of the novel. As Forster puts it: “To the end of his life Clive
was not sure of the exact moment of departure, and with the
approach of old age he grew uncertain whether the moment had yet
occurred.”35 This sense of deferred queerness, or queer deferral, in
*Maurice* is staged at the end of “Ansell” in the laughter of what I
would like to call a deconstructive optative or, with a wink at
Jonathan Dollimore, *deco-optative*.36 It is the dreaming of literature,

36. This notion of the deconstructive optative would perhaps provide
an illuminating point of agreement and disjunction with what Dollimore
has to say about queer theory more generally. For him, queer theory is
“wishful theory.” As he puts it: “Queer radicals, far from liberating the
full potential of homosexuality, tame and rework it in various ways.” In
particular, “they tend to represent themselves as personally immune to the
subversiveness of desire” (WT 21). Queer theory, he goes on, is “[w]ishful
as in wishful thinking. It is a pseudo-radical, pseudo-philosophical,
redescription of the world according to an *a priori* agenda... In wishful
theory a preconceived narrative of the world is elaborated by mixing and
matching bits and pieces of diverse theories until the wished-for result is
achieved... [T]he contrived narratives of queer theory insulate their
adherents from social reality by screening it through high theory, and this
in the very act of fantasizing its subversion or at least its inherent instability”
(WT 21). Dollimore’s is an intriguingly “literary” version of queer theory:
queer theory is characterized, at least in part, in terms of its narrative
contrivances and its power of fictional or quasi-fictional redescription.
I would broadly subscribe to what he has to say here, concerning the
ways that critical or theoretical discourse loses sight of what he calls “the
subversiveness of desire.” Beginning with the remarkable Sexual Dissidence:
Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991),
its dream-power, the strange might of a narrator (here a fictional “I” called Edward, but just as often an anonymous “I” or so-called “third-person”) who knows more than he or she should or could, with a strange knowingness which is perhaps too easily and too quickly organized and transposed into the familiar filters and grids of narratology. At issue here is the question of a new and altogether queerer vocabulary for flashback (retrospection or analepsis), anticipation (foreshadowing or prolepsis), omniscience, point of view and focalization, indeed for the entire workings and effects of magical thinking in literature, for its twisted, impossible knowledge and knowledge-effects: “for I have not yet realized what has happened.” I am homosexual, I am queer, from now on, without realizing it, in a future that has not yet happened, that cannot yet and yet must have happened.

* * *

On another little bypath, close yet almost out of the picture, I see the figure of Lee Edelman, or more specifically his provocative book, No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive. Though resolutely Lacanian and curiously silent on Derrida, Edelman’s book has notable affinities with the concerns of the present essay. Specifically, we might think here of the stress he gives to a deconstructive notion

Dollimore’s work seems to me to offer admirable analyses and a powerful affirmation of the incalculable, unforeseeable, protean or (as I would like to call it) veering character of desire. At the same time, however, I wonder if his characterization of queer theory as “wishful” doesn’t actually have the effect of eliding the question of the wish, or at least of bracketing off attention to the ways in which desire is necessarily at work in what is called “theory.” The phrase “wishful theory” perhaps inevitably suggests that there is also “non-wishful theory,” or indeed that theory should be not wishful but, rather, separable from wishing or desire, as if its discourse could be free of all affectivity, optativity or performative effects (whether intentional, unconscious or, more generally, iterable in Derrida’s sense). For more on the notion of “wishful theory,” see Dollimore’s earlier essay, “Bisexuality, Heterosexuality, and Wishful Theory,” in Textual Practice 10.3 (1996): 523-39, as well as the revised version of some of this material in his Sex, Literature and Censorship (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).

of irony, “that queerest of rhetorical devices” as he calls it (NF 23);³⁸
or his characterization of queer theory in terms of a “refusal . . . of
every substantialization of identity . . . and, by extension, of history
as linear narrative . . . in which meaning succeeds in revealing itself
—as itself—through time” (NE 4). In other respects, Edelman’s
argument might seem contrary to what we are trying to elucidate
in these pages: “queer,” for him, “comes to figure the bar to every
realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every
social structure or form” (NF 4). Queerness, he thus comes to assert,
“promises, in more than one sense of the phrase, absolutely nothing”
(NF 5). Edelman’s work is predicated on the force of its polemical
negative: think queer, he says, as “no future.” Queer would be that
which “cuts the thread of futurity” (NF 30), above all insofar as that
future comprises “reproductive futurism” (NF 4, 27). This may look
quite far from Derrida’s thinking, especially if one recalls his repeated
affirmation of the “democracy to come,” and his cautioning against
“los[ing] sight of the excess . . . of the future”; the very notion of “no
future,” in this respect, would be linked with totalitarianism.³⁹
But Edelman’s polemic, I think, is a lot closer to Derrida than it may
initially appear. For the force of his argument is in fact bound up
with what I’ve been referring to as the deconstructive optative: what
is at issue is not so much “no future,” as it is a thinking of the future
in terms of a wilful commitment to “disturbing, [and/or] queering,
social organization as such” (NF 17), in terms of “embrac[ing]” this
precisely as “the impossible” (NF 109), an “impossible project” that
we “might undertake” (NF 27; emphasis added). No “no future”
without deconstructive desire, without “what is queerest,” namely,
the “willingness to insist intransitively—to insist that the future stop
here” (NF 31; emphasis added).

³⁸. Edelman specifically invokes uncanniness when he writes: “Queer
theory . . . would constitute the site where the radical threat posed by irony,
which heteronormative culture displaces onto the figure of the queer, is
uncannily returned by queers who no longer disown but assume their figural
identity as embodiments of the figuralization, and hence the disfiguration,
of identity itself” (NF 24). The word “assume” is up to mischievous
business in this formulation—its ambiguity (merely “assuming”) nicely
sidestepping the question of “owning” or “appropriating.”
³⁹. See, in particular, Jacques Derrida, A Taste for the Secret, 22.
Would that you might taste me. Would that you might taste my selftaste. Impossible, but desired. Such would be the deconstructive optative. In “Justices,” the late great essay on deconstruction and queer theory, apropos J. Hillis Miller and Gerard Manley Hopkins (first given as a lecture in April 2003), Derrida suggests that this is where love and friendship come from. (We may also recall how profoundly his work elsewhere intertwines the two—friendship and love, love in friendship—above all, perhaps, in *Politics of Friendship.*)

He writes:

Love and friendship are born in the experience of this unshareable selftaste: an unshareable experience and nevertheless shared, the agreement of two renunciations to say the impossible. As for hatred, jealousy, envy, cruelty, they do not renounce. That is perhaps why they go together more often with knowledge, inquisitorial curiosity, the scopic drive, and epistemophilia.

I would like to relate this renunciation, this double renunciation “to say the impossible,” to the radical passivity to which I alluded at the beginning and to what seems to be happening at the very heart of *Billy Budd*, in other words, to the force of Melville’s work as “an inside narrative” that lets us see the “hatred, jealousy, envy [and] cruelty” embodied in Claggart, alongside the declaration that what “may have” happened in the final interview between Billy Budd and Captain Vere, “each radically sharing in the rarer qualities of our nature,” was “never known” (BB 156). But time is running out.

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42. A sudden lurch, she is saying in my ear, into a footnote, scarcely a whisper, concerning the Handsome Sailor or foretopman of such “masculine
“Justices” contains all sorts of strange and surprising treasures. It picks up Miller’s picking up the remarkable phrase “selftaste” in Hopkins, in his early book *The Disappearance of God*, linking it with a taste for the secret and a taste for deconstruction, as well as with 

beauty” but also embodying something of “the beautiful woman” (BB 111), his voice “singularly musical” but with one “defect,” viz., “an organic hesitancy” (111), the murmur and proliferation of voices echoing (like that of each or any reader subvocalizing or reading aloud as s/he goes) in the wake of the appalling benediction at the heart of Melville’s text, the work so worked upon (from 1886 up until his death in 1891) and so deferred in appearance (eventually coming out in print only in 1924, but have we really even begun to read it, for example the hesitancy of its title, turning between “Billy Budd, Sailor” and “Billy Budd, Foretopman,” into its abyssal subtitle, “an inside narrative”?), the last words of Billy, “delivered in the clear melody of a singing bird on the point of launching from the twig”: “‘God bless Captain Vere!’” (BB 163). Billy Budd might seem to resemble one of the *papillons* in Derrida’s “Circumfession”: the sailor’s “external apparel, white jumper and white duck trousers, each more or less soiled, dimly glimmered in the obscure light of the bay like a patch of discolored snow in early April lingering at some upland cave’s black mouth. In effect he is already in his shroud, or the garments that shall serve him in lieu of one” (BB 159). As with the “bypath” with which I began, this fragmented sentence or two might detain us sinning at literature’s pleasure for an inordinately long time, among other things precisely in terms of its derangement of time, the internal shiftings or the ruinously, magically, impossibly internal-external shiftings of a narrative perspective between past (“dimly glimmered”), present (“In effect he is already in his shroud”) and future (“the garments that shall serve him”). Even more intensely than *Moby-Dick*, *Billy Budd* seems at once to emerge out of and to provoke the experience of what Leo Bersani calls “the inability to stop reading.” (See Leo Bersani, “Incomparable America,” in *The Culture of Redemption* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990], 136-54: here, 150.) This inability is figured perhaps most sharply in the extraordinary subtitle of Melville’s last work, “an inside narrative,” a phrase that alerts us to the irreducibly and inexhaustibly telepathic or literary dimensions of this apparently “historical” account. It may be tempting to categorize and thus effectively bracket off the question and experience of this “inability” in terms of a principle of uncertainty that would be “queer”-identified. This is a danger that seems to me at issue in Robert K. Martin’s suggestion that the “adoption of a queer model that proposes contingency instead of certainty seems likely to offer the best future for the study of sexuality in Melville’s texts” (Robert K. Martin, “Melville and Sexuality,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Robert S. Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 200). Citing these words, in an
the meaning of “queer” and the “unspeakable.”

Derrida stresses the queer character of the term and concept of “inscape,” Hopkins’s neologism for the uniqueness of design and pattern, the singularity and even, one might say, the signature, or signature-effect, of his perception and experience of the world. “All the world is full of inscape,” writes Hopkins: “looking out of my window I caught it in the random clods and broken heaps of snow made by the cast of a broom.” Snowflakes of sound, fallen or still falling, falling without cease, still to fall, as in the extraordinary lines describing the storm and coming shipwreck in “The Wreck of the Deutschland”: “Wiry and white-fiery and whirlwind-swivelled snow / Spins to the widow-making unchilding unfathering deeps.” Inscape is queer, Hopkins affirms; it becomes queer: “Now, it is the virtue of design, pattern, or inscape to be distinctive and it is the vice of distinctiveness to become queer. This vice I cannot have escaped.”

As ever alert to

—Impossible Uncanniness—

essay on “Gender and Sexuality” in Melville, Leland S. Persons likewise seeks to propound the notion of a critical “queer model” in terms of uncertainty: “Uncertainty is such a common feeling for Melville’s readers and contingency such a common experience for Melville’s characters, that a ‘queer model’ of approach to just about any issue in Melville’s writing makes good sense” (Leland S. Person, “Gender and Sexuality,” in A Companion to Herman Melville, ed. Wyn Kelley [Oxford: Blackwell, 2006], 244-5). Uncertainty as a “queer model” here risks becoming an end in itself, in a sort of repetition of that error by which deconstruction in earlier days became identified with “indeterminacy” or “indeterminism.” If queer theory has a special relationship with dubitation, this has to do with more, not less, critical and inventive modes of questioning, with trying to affirm and analyze, affirm by analyzing singularity (whether of signature, event or context), not with referring things back to some generalized logic or model of uncertainty, as if for its own sake. The inability to stop reading is still a matter of reading. (To be continued.)


the minuscule shifts of words, Derrida notes this slippage from “inscape” to “escape”: “It is [Hopkins’s] destiny, his virtue, but also his vice, not to have managed to escape the inscape. He was not able to escape the becoming-vice, the becoming-queer, of this virtue” (J 240). In this veering from “inscape” to “escape,” there is a queer, cryptic veil or cape that is perhaps another way of getting at the strangeness of “selftaste.” Inscape has to do with vice and virtue and with the absolute singularity and aloneness that is you, yourself. “In a childlike fashion,” as Derrida puts it, you wonder what it feels like to be the other, or rather how it tastes to be Hillis Miller or, let’s say, Jinan Joudeh, or even God. Derrida argues that it is on the basis of Hopkins’s “solitude and the unspeakable singularity of [his] selftaste” that he “speaks, addresses himself to another, and gives to be shared just that, the unshareable of his own taste” (J 241).

Derrida asks: “How does the word ‘queer’ impose itself on Hopkins?” (J 240). In doing so, his text bears witness at once to the queer time of “queer” and to the deconstructive force of substitutability, that logic according to which the irreplaceably singular can and must be replaced on the spot. For here is “queer” in Hopkins, at least in Derrida’s reading of it, long before the date of 1922 specified in the OED, and here is this essay, “Justices,” prompting us to wonder in turn: “How does the word ‘queer’ impose itself on Derrida?” The author of “Justices” declares: “The singular says itself, but it says itself as ‘unspeakable.’ What is strange and ‘queer’ here is that all this comes down to an experience and, in Hopkins’s own words, to a sort of theory of the queer, if not to the impossible uncanniness of a ‘queer theory’” (J 240). It is in the context of this question of “impossible uncanniness” and its “unlimited” pertinence, experience of the impossible necessarily partaking of or sharing in what he calls “the experience of thought and literary writing” (J 243-244), that Derrida arrives at perhaps his most aphoristic, haunting and haunted formulation: “To be is to be queer” (J 243). If Derrida’s work argues for—while enacting—a queering of being, the same can be said of time: deconstruction.

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queers being and time.

* * *

I would like to conclude anecdotally, with another footnote of sorts. The brutality, and brutal actuality, of homophobia remains. It is an overdetermined, cryptic story, no doubt, of departures and railway stations (such as the one recalled by Jonathan Dollimore at the start of his book *Sexual Dissidence*). The day after the “life after theory” conference at the University of Loughborough in November 2001, early in the morning, I drove Jacques Derrida to the station (“the oldest railway station in England,” as a little plaque on the wall told us), to see him off on his journey back to Paris via London. Such farewells were always strange, disturbing, touching on the uncanny. As he says in *The Work of Mourning*, precisely apropos scenes of “parting in a train station”: “we do not know if and when and where we will meet again”48. We arrived at least forty minutes early and were the only people there. It was cold, so we went into the waiting room, where we talked about, among other things, the uncanny: I asked him if he would come to Sussex and speak on the subject and he agreed to do so. (This was to have been in June 2003: the seminar never happened, in fact, for by then he was ill.) By the time the train for London arrived there were quite a few people on the platform, including a corpulent railway employee with closely cropped hair, evidently the so-called station master. (Thomas the Tank Engine eat your heart out.) Having been far and away the first people waiting for the train, we were somewhat slow to find the right coach, and then, still on the platform, we said farewell in our customary way. We embraced and kissed. We kissed in French style, *bises*, lovingly, cheek to cheek. And at this, it became obvious, the nearby official was incensed with disgust. I could see it clear as day in his eyes. He ordered the doors closed before Jacques was able to get on. I managed to stick my foot in, just in the nick of time: the official was forced to have the doors reopened and Jacques was able to board. Without a word on this subject ever being exchanged afterwards, the train departed.