Derrida's Queer Root(s)

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In *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida writes, “The trace is not only the disappearance of origin . . . it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally [en retour/ in retrospect] by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin.” By asserting the *après-coup* constitution of origins, Derrida therefore implies that searching for, then “finding,” one’s roots consists not in returning to pre-existing origins; rather, the very return posits them *after the fact* as if they existed prior to it. At first glance, this key passage for what may be called Derrida’s *deconstruction of origins* (a critical component of the deconstruction of essence since his earliest writings) might seem contrary to the articulation of identity through narrative returns to origins or roots. Indeed, if the notion of roots literalizes identity’s essence as an organic attachment to its origins in a material, geographical site,
then, for Derrida, any metaphysical search for origins is actually a writing of origins as fiction, that is, of original fictions. Yet Derrida increasingly wove an autobiographical thread into writings like “Circumfession”\(^4\) and *Monolingualism of the Other*\(^5\) with the result that, in spite of his deconstruction of origins, origins keep coming back in the form of narrative returns to his Jewish-Algerian roots. Therefore, Derrida’s later writings (and their deployment of the autobiographical) offer rich pre-texts for unraveling the ties that bind a metaphysics of origins to accounts of identity as rootedness as well as a strategy for dealing with a rooted identity that resists such an unraveling.

Of Derrida’s autobiographical texts, “Circumfession”—a sort of footnote running the entire length of Geoffrey Bennington’s “Derridabase,” which, together, constitute their jointly authored *Jacques Derrida* (1991)—perhaps best exemplifies this seemingly contradictory combination of the deconstruction of origins, on the one hand, and their affirmation (that is, an affirmation of origins that ends up queering the very notion of roots), on the other. For here, Derrida lavishes attention not only on his own penis (or root), but also on the circumcision of that penis as a figure for his “own” Jewish-Algerian origins (or roots). Written around his penis, these origins are also doubly circumscribed by seemingly opposing limits, namely, the limits of identity and those of its deconstruction. By focusing on the (homo)erotics that arise when Derrida’s penis enters his writing, this essay brings Derrida’s autobiographical texts into contrast with deconstruction and argues that this contradiction is at the heart of a queering of identity for which deconstruction might be read as an allegory. Once autobiography intrudes into Derrida’s deconstructive writing, deconstruction turns out to have been, in part, about identity all along.


In “Circumfession,” Derrida returns to his “own” Algerian childhood by reading Saint Augustine’s Confessions (C.E. 397–400). In writing his “own” autobiography through reading/writing the autobiography of another, Derrida is already queering a certain notion of identity, even before we encounter any explicit mention of “homosexuality.” In one passage, Derrida evokes his North African literary forebear as follows: “I have the vision of SA, too, as a little homosexual Jew (from Algiers or New York), he has repressed everything, basically converts himself quite early on into a Christian Don Juan for fear of AIDS” (C 172). Here, through a sort of Berber pre-text, Derrida returns to a pre-Muslim, pre-French Algeria, thereby unverting Saint Augustine and recasting his Christianization as repression. In yet another passage, this vision of “SA”—the “little homosexual Jew”—is extended to Derrida himself:

[M]y impossible homosexuality, the one I shall always associate with the name of Claude, the male and female cousins of my childhood, they overflow my corpus, the syllable CL, in Glas and elsewhere, admitting to a stolen pleasure, for example those grapes from the vineyard of the Arab landowner, one of those rare Algerian bourgeois in El-Biar…. [S]ince then I have followed the confessions of theft at the heart of autobiographies, homosexual ventriloquy, the untranslatable debt, Rousseau’s ribbon, SA’s pears…. (C 159–60)

Derrida’s reading of Saint Augustine, then, occurs as a homosexual encounter that equates reading/writing with queering, both of which are also the means by which the autobiographical subject identifies with his “own” pre-text and becomes (one with) it.

It is no accident that these queerings occur through several returns: to an Algerian childhood episode of stealing, for example, and to Derrida’s own previous writings, namely Glas, in which, as we shall see, he lavishes much attention on penises and erections. Moreover, by mentioning Rousseau’s theft of a ribbon, he not only inserts himself into a genealogy of autobiographical forebears (from Saint Augustine’s Confessions, to Rousseau’s, to his own), but he also recalls his own reading of Rousseau’s confessions of masturbating. If Derrida transforms the autobiographies of others into his “own,”
such that queering Saint Augustine is simultaneously a self-queering, then reading Rousseau masturbating is a way of masturbating (with) him. This practice of reading/writing (as) a sexual act is exemplary of Derrida’s “homosexual ventriloquy,” which consists of making his pre-texts speak or, perhaps, of throwing his “own” voice to make us believe that it is they who speak instead of him.

Besides these mentions of “homosexuality,” Jacques Derrida carries out another, more subtle queering of Derrida in a photograph depicting Bennington standing behind Derrida, who is sitting at a computer (See Fig. 1). The caption to this photograph reads, “Post Card or tableau vivant . . . ‘a hidden pretext for writing in my own signature behind his back’” (C 11), thereby asserting a visual link between this photo and the eponymous image of The Post Card (1980), an illustration taken from a “13th century Fortune-telling book (Prognostica Socratis basilei)” by Matthew Paris (See Fig. 2). This illustration depicts Plato standing behind Socrates, as if the latter is taking dictation from the former in an inversion of the conventional wisdom regarding which philosopher is transmitting the other’s thoughts in writing. It is, no doubt, this inversion between teacher and student—an inversion of the conventional primacy of the spoken word over writing—that first attracted Derrida to this image, and yet he proceeds to push this inversion towards queerer limits by sexualizing the “post card”:

...I see Plato getting an erection in Socrates’ back and see the insane hubris of his prick, an interminable, disproportionate erection traversing Paris’s head like a single idea and then the copyist’s chair, before slowly sliding, still warm, under Socrates’ right leg, in harmony or symphony with the movement of this phallus sheaf [ce faisceau de phallus/this bundle of phalluses], the points, plumes, pens, fingers,

6. See Jacques Derrida, “... That Dangerous Supplement...” (OG 141-144).
7. The quotation within this quotation is from one of Bennington’s passages later in the book. See Jacques Derrida, 316.
[finger]nails and grattoirs, the very pencil boxes which address themselves [qui s’adressent/that rise up to one another] in the same direction . . . . It plunges under the waves made by the veils around the plump buttocks, you see the rounded double, improbable [invraisemblable] enough, it plunges straight down, rigid, like the nose of a stingray to electrocute the old man . . . . All of this, that I do not know or do not yet want to see, also comes back from the bottom of the waters of my memory, a bit as if I had drawn or engraved the scene, from the first day that, in an Algiers lyceé no doubt, I first heard of those two. (PC 18; 22–23)

By reading the elongated object protruding from beneath Socrates’ leg as Plato’s penis, Derrida suggests that the latter is fucking the former between the legs. Socrates is thus taking more than dictation, Plato giving more than the spoken word. Platon prend Socrate, qui lui donne son cul. Or, we could say, Plato gives it to Socrates, who in turn takes it (between the legs). Yet even the text that Jacques Derrida sends us back to (The Post Card) sends us back even further to Derrida’s Algerian adolescence, as if such a return to his Jewish-Algerian roots was inseparable from his reflections on the possibility of two of his philosophical pre-texts and forebears engaging in intercrural sex.

Derrida’s queer reading of the give-and-take between Plato and Socrates in The Post Card returns in Jacques Derrida to inflect his relation with his translator and commentator, Geoffrey Bennington. By reading the above passage from The Post Card into the photograph in Jacques Derrida, we could say that Bennington gives it to Derrida, who in turn takes it (up the ass). The photo thus turns Bennington into Derrida’s “top” just as Derrida’s autobiographical reflections are positioned at the “bottom” of the page. We could also say that, as Derrida’s autobiography undergirds Bennington’s account of his life’s work, the top becomes an allegory of the bottom. Perhaps I, too, become Derrida’s top in my reading of his work. Or is it deconstruction itself that is constantly being, not undergirded, but undermined—screwed—by the insertion of the autobiographical (penis)? “Circumfession” is thus not only the text in which Derrida most literally inserts his penis and his autobiography into his writing;
Fig. 1: From Jacques Derrida (1991). Note the “post card” in the foreground.

Fig. 2: Image from The Post Card (1980).
it is also the text in which the penis of another is inserted into him. To read/write Derrida, to turn him into the pre-text for (in this case, queer) theorizing, is also to penetrate him (that is, sodomize as well as understand him).

If we might also read the particular give-and-take that I have just described as a queering of Derrida’s writings on the gift, one text, in particular, seems to give more than others: *Glas*, in which each numbered page consists of two columns (each containing multiple sub-columns or inserts). The one on the right, devoted to Jean Genet, offers the most explicit penises, which should not surprise, given their ubiquity in Genet’s writings. The left-hand column is devoted to the Hegelian dialectic and Hegel’s reflections on the relationship between Christianity, the family, civil society, and the State. According to Derrida, claims to truth in Hegel’s progressive narrative from Judaism to Christianity depend on the notion that Christianity represents the fulfillment or teleology of Judaism (like the synthesis, or Aufhebung, of the dialectic) in which the three terms of the lifting up become a kind of Holy Family: “…Aufhebung first in the heart [sein] of Christianity, then Aufhebung of Christianity, of the absolute revealed religion in[to] philosophy [absolute religion raised up or highlighted within philosophy/de la religion absolue relevée dans la philosophie] that will have been its truth.”

In fact, Derrida’s deconstruction of Truth—as Christianity and heterosexuality—depends upon the sexualization of Aufhebung:

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9. See Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), H70, *ibid.*, *Glas* (Paris: Denoël/Gonthier, 1981), H99. Hereafter cited as G. Page numbers from *Glas* are also accompanied by an H or a G to indicate whether quotations are from the Hegel or Genet column. Wherever Leavey and Rand have inserted the original in brackets, I have kept their italicization. Unless otherwise noted, any insertion of the original that is not italicized is my own. In this particular passage, the translators seem to have mistaken the relevée of the original with révélée. In most cases, they translate relever as relieve, in the sense of relieving someone of their duties and responsibilities, as well as putting into relief (as in highlighting). This translation, however, removes the allusions to erections that Derrida makes in his discussions of Aufhebung in *Glas*, allusions I have attempted to highlight (*relever*) in my own alterations to his translations. The bold typeface used to do so is my own.
Copulation relieves [highlights/raises up] the difference [Il la relève]: Aufhebung is very precisely the relation of copulation and the sexual difference.

The relief [la relève] in general cannot be understood without sexual copulation, nor sexual copulation in general without the relief [la relève].

Passages such as these serve to associate the lifting, or raising up, of Aufhebung with erection; indeed, Derrida, we might say, turns the Aufhebung that is Christianity back against itself to get a rise out of it. In fact, this rise occurs, in part, by turning the Last Supper into the scene of a homosexual orgy in which penetration is again sexual as well as epistemological:

Jesus’ identifying penetration in his disciples—first John, the beloved disciple; the Father’s in Jesus and through him in his disciples—John first; subjective in a first time, then objective, becomes subjective by ingestion. Consum(mat)ing [La consommation] interiorizes, idealizes, relieves [uplifts/relève] . . . . Provided it names, it engages a discourse, the movement of the tongue [language/la langue] is analogous to the copulation at the Last Supper scene [la Cène].

This whole analogon takes form, stands up, makes sense [tient debout], and lets itself be grasped only under the category of categories. It relieves itself [lifts itself up/se relève] all the time. It is an Aufhebung. (G H69; 96–97)

Derrida here reverses/inverts Hegel’s hetero-dialectical understanding of Christianity, thereby deconstructing the Christianity/Judaism distinction, turning Judaism against Christianity in order to queer the latter. Indeed, if Derrida refers to Hegel’s “absolute knowledge” throughout Glas as “Sa” (Savoir absolu), this abbreviation inverts the

10. This passage is a good example of the shortcomings of Leavey and Rand’s translation. Only as a noun does la relève refer uniquely to relieving (someone of their duties). Yet Derrida is associating la relève as feminine article plus noun with the same words as feminine direct-object pronoun plus the third-person-singular form of the verb in the present.

11. La Cène (a homophone of the French word for “scene”) is French for “the Last Supper.”
capitalized abbreviation for Saint Augustine in “Circumfession” (sA) much as he turns “sA” into an invert and a Jew. Moreover, through both Sa/sA’s relation to their homophone ça (“the id”), Derrida further sexualizes knowledge as penetration. In Saint Augustine (sA), we also see Sa as an invert(ed) truth, the truth inverted, inversion as Truth.

From Aufhebung as erection, Derrida procedes through the French colloquial for having an erection, bander (more accurately, “to get a hard on”), towards multiple parallels with Genet’s penises and Hegel’s erections. The strongest of these parallels is found in Derrida’s own writing on both Genet and Hegel, which takes the form of two bands of text. Indeed, Derrida suggests rather strongly that content shapes the form of Glas, which itself becomes a kind of double hard-on: “he bands erect double [il bande double]” (G 201; 280), “DOUBLE BAND(S) . . . Band contre band [DOUBLE BANDE . . . Bande contre bande]” (G 66; 92). We might then read this double bande as not only a visualization of the Hegelian dialectic, but also its queering, since the erection of Christianity as Judaism’s Aufhebung is literalized on the page and forced to rub against Genet’s erect penises in a kind of theoretical frottage or dry humping. Moreover, Hegel’s synthesis (Christianity) becomes just another thesis for which Genet’s penises serve as the antithesis in a queering of the Hegelian dialectic.

As if the mechanics of this theoretical maneuver could use more greasing up, Derrida inserts some lubrication through one of Genet’s fetish objects, the tube of Vaseline so lovingly described in Journal du voleur [The Thief’s Journal]. Derrida glorifies this object—“The (French) tongue [or language] then ought to sing, to fete the little tube of vaseline” (G 162; 226)—and sexualizes it even beyond Genet’s own allusions to its potential sexual uses: “And the spit with which the gliding mast would be smeared [s’enduirait] becomes very quickly—the penis dipped into a very fluid glue—some vaseline. And even, without forcing [sans avoir à forcer], a tube of mentholated vaseline” (G 143; 200; emphasis added). As if the tube of Vaseline was not sufficient, Derrida even adds a little spit to the mixture, as his pen becomes a penis (as does Plato’s in The Post Card). Moreover,

this pen(is) needs its own lubrication: “[S]o try with the tube of vaseline . . . before the beginning of the book” (G G143–44). And if, in *Glas*, writing is equated with the insertion of a penis (the literal subject of “Circumfession”), by turning the pages of *Glas*, the reader too rubs erection against erection, an act facilitated by the textual lubrication provided by Derrida (and Genet). But the Vaseline does more than provide textual lubrication to ease the turning of pages in *Glas*; it also eases the insertion of Derrida’s “own” penis in the form of *Glas*’s most prominent autobiographical references.

One of these references is a passage over two pages long, in which Derrida describes an Algerian synagogue where the Torah is brought out from behind [derrière] curtains:  

> “The Torah wears a robe and a crown. Its two rollers [rouleaux] are then parted [écartés] like two legs; the Torah is lifted to arm’s length and the rabbi’s scepter approximately follows the upright text. The bands [Les bandes] in which it was wrapped had been previously undone” (G G240; 335).

Derrida also writes here of the rabbi “raising the two parted columns [élever les deux colonnes écartés],” and states, “Afterwards, they had to roll up the sacred text and wrap [bander] it all over again” (G G241; 336). Derrida thus compares the doubly erectile structure of *Glas* to the two rollers of the Torah. Or conversely, we could say that he uses the form of *Glas* to sexualize, or queer, the Torah, and vice versa, since we can read these lines as converting the erect bands into spread legs.

Yet despite the implied homoeroticism of bringing so many penises into play, there is a way in which Derrida’s predilection for the penile in *Glas* is not queer. It is by no means the only text in which he displays an affinity for penises; almost all his writings have something to do with penises, since, with very few exceptions, all the writers he writes about have one. That he would come to focus on his “own” might thus come as no surprise. For a writer who has consistently aspired to a deconstruction of phallogocentrism, and who sounds its death knell in *Glas*—“[g]las du phallogocentrisme” (G G315)—his writings could be read as phallocentric, indeed, as

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reinforcing the very phallogocentrism he claims to deconstruct. But
to do so in the case of Glas would be to equate the penis with the
phallus (which of course cannot be completely separated from it)
and therefore to circumvent a further dislodging of the phallus from
its supposed corporeal referent. And yet, by literalizing the phallus
in a series of erect penises, which he then rubs against each other in
(homo)sexual contact, does Derrida not use a kind of male queering
to deflate the phallus and the phallogocentrism that is Christianity?
Indeed, bringing penises together in Glas brings about a perversely
emasculating effect.

We see this effect in the above description of the Torah,
which transforms two erections into opened legs, legs opened not to
the penetration of heterosexual coitus but to the pointed finger of the
scepter used to read a sacred text that cannot be touched by human
hands. This sex change occurs in other passages in Glas as well, for
no sooner does Derrida erect penises (and textual columns), than he
begins to cut them down: “If I write two texts at once, you will not
be able to castrate me. If I delinearize, I erect. But at the same time
I divide my act and my desire. I—mark(s) the division, and always
escaping you, I simulate unceasingly and take my pleasure nowhere.
I castrate myself—I remain(s) myself thus—and I ‘play at coming’
[je ‘joue à jouir’]” (G G65). In his discussion of Genet, Derrida
stages a castration that is not one, a “castration” that is undone after
rubbing against his association of circumcision with castration in the
opposite column:

Circumcision is a determining cut. It permits cutting but,
at the same time and in the same stroke [du même coup],
remaining attached to the cut. The Jew arranges himself so
that the cut part [le coupé] remains attached to the cut.
Jewish errance limited by adherence and the countercut.
The Jew is cutting only in order to treat thus, to contract
the cut with itself…. With this symbolic castration that
Hegelian discourse lightly glides over, Abraham associates
endogamy…. (G H41)

14. I would like to thank Lawrence R. Schehr for pointing out both
the form of the scepter and its role in this passage.
Here Derrida establishes an analogy between the cutting (couper) of circumcision (and the castration associated with it) and Abraham’s cutting himself off from his original people to wander elsewhere and found a new nation. Jewish identity, cut into the member of the male members of the group, depends on an attachment to circumcision/castration: “[Ça] bands erect, castration. [Ça bande, la castration.] Infirmity itself bandages itself [se panse/thinks itself] by banding erect” (G G138; 193). Circumcision/castration is thus a kind of pharmakon that marks Jewish identity as wounded while healing the very wounds it produces; it is the cut that simultaneously separates Jews from Gentiles and binds (bande) Jews together.

Indeed, in “Circumfession,” circumcision becomes a source of jouissance:

[T]he supreme enjoyment [jouissance suprême] for all, first of all for him, me, the nursling, imagine the loved woman herself circumcising (me), as the mother did in the biblical narrative, slowly provoking ejaculation in her mouth just as she swallows the crown of bleeding skin with the sperm as a sign of exultant alliance [alliance exultante], her legs open, her breasts between my legs, . . . passing skins from mouth to mouth like a ring . . . . (C 217–18; 202–3)

Here the jouissance results from heterosexual (yet Oedipal) fellatio, though one that is paradoxically based on the emasculation of a circumcision associated with castration. This curious obsession with bloody fellatio is articulated though a chain of associations, the first being a traditional aspect of the circumcision ceremony: “[S]o many mohels for centuries had practiced suction, or mezizah, right on the glans, mixing wine and blood with it, until the thing was abolished in Paris in 1843 for reasons of hygiene . . .” (C 69). For Derrida, mezizah is also associated with the Biblical story of “Zipporah, the one who repaired the failing of a Moses incapable of circumcising his own son, before telling him, ‘You are a husband of blood to me,’ she had to eat the still bloody foreskin, I imagine first by sucking it, my first beloved cannibal, initiator at the sublime gate of fellatio” (C 68–69). By characterizing his mother as Zipporah’s descendant, Derrida provides a matrilineal alternative to the genealogy inscribed on the Jewish penis, connecting men to their fathers, circumcised
like them before, in a chain leading all the way back to Abraham.\textsuperscript{15}

Derrida’s roots are thus cut into his root, so to speak, which is the site of a sexual pleasure that Daniel Boyarin has called “Jewissance”:\textsuperscript{16} “[T]he mixture on this incredible [last] supper [scene/cène] of the wine and blood, let people see it how I see it on my sex each time blood is mixed with sperm or the saliva of fellatio, describe my sex throughout thousands of years of Judaism . . .” (C 153; 145). Having one’s freshly circumcised penis sucked by the moist lips of the (ancestral) mother connects one to previous penises similarly sucked in a kind of communion (making the Last Supper Jewish—which, of course, as a Passover seder, it was). The recuperation of castration in an Oedipal relation with the mother, though, need not result in a decentering of phallogocentrism, or even masculinity; \textit{castration founds the very masculinity it threatens}, at least in Freudian models of gendered development. And yet, Derrida, I would say, emasculates otherwise, by turning the “penis” into an orifice through another complex chain of significations.

In \textit{Glas}, the reversibility of sex is part of the cutting down of erections: “The golden fleece surrounds the neck, the cunt, the verge [la verge/the penis], the apparition or the appearance of a hole in erection, of a hole and an erection at once, of an erection in the hole or a hole in the erection . . .” (G G66; 93). Like the castration that is not one, this erection that is not one further complicates any association one might make between Derrida’s cutting and the castration foundational to Freudian masculinity. Whereas Freudian castration cuts men off (separates them) from women by also cutting the latter (defining them as castrated, as being not-men), Derrida’s castration, as will become clear below, carries out a deconstruction of sexual difference. And, of course, further distinguishing Derrida from Freud is the \textit{jouissance} that the former derives from self-castration.

\textsuperscript{15} See Nancy K. Miller, \textit{Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent’s Death} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 28: “The penis is . . . the place where Jewish genealogy gets marked on the male body. A son is circumcised like his fathers before him.”

In “Circumfession,” it is circumcision itself that, while cutting the penis, removes an orifice, or graft, that nonetheless remains attached. Derrida, in turn, turns this foreskin (a kind of ring) into a wedding ring (*alliance*, in French), marking the alliance of Jewish men with God and their covenant with him.

In *Glas*, this ring is sexualized and becomes a site of sexual penetration: “The present of the cup [or cut/coupe] that makes copulation possible in the covenant [l’alliance], that present is not given, is not present. It presents itself only in the expectation of another coupling [accouplement] that will come to fulfill, accomplish (*vollenden*) what is announced or broached/breached here” (G H68; 96). This ring is even described through imagery strongly suggesting a sphincter: “The annulus [L’anneau/ring] is too tight [serré]. Let us not give up. What I am trying to write—gl—is . . . what passes [or happens/ce qui se passe], more or less well, through the rhythmic strict-ure of an annulus. Try, one anniversary day [or birth-day], to push a ring around an *erected*, extravagant, stretched style [stylus]” (G G109; 153–54). This eroticization of the foreskin (graft) even inflects Derrida’s relation with Bennington. Although Derrida characterizes the text he offers Bennington as “uncircumcised”—“everything G. can be expecting of me, a supposedly idiomatic, unbroachable, unreadable, uncircumcised piece of writing” (C 194)—the actual content of “Circumfession” (his “own” autobiography) is given to Bennington for incorporation into *Jacques Derrida*. In other words, Derrida gives himself as text in a gift, most literally, of his penis, or perhaps its grafted foreskin. This ring, sacrificed to seal an alliance with God, becomes a wedding ring (*alliance*) offered to Bennington.

One might think that all this cutting and bleeding would be enough to make most men go limp, but the loss of erection—like the loss that is castration—nonetheless keeps what is cut off:

The *erion* [or golden fleece] derides everything said in the name of truth or the phallus, sports [joue] the *erection* in the downy being [l’être à poil] of its writing. Derision does not simply make the *erection* fall; it keeps the *erection* erect but does so by submitting the erection to what it keeps the *erection* from, already, the crack of the proper no(un) [du nom propre]. (G G69; 96–97)
And, according to Derrida, this unbinding (débander) of penises challenges the phallus, as opposed to simply upholding it (and/or holding it up). In other words, Derrida erects (érige) in Glas pour débander, to make his theoretical writing lose the very erections he inserts into it by turning each of them into an “érection débandée” (G H165). This cutting down or turning off of erections, moreover, is not merely one example of what deconstruction performs through an insertion of penises—including Derrida’s “own”—into writing; it describes the very act of deconstruction itself. For, as has often been pointed out, etymologically deconstruction and analysis (to loosen again or untie again) are quite close. From Glas we can also say that the action designated by the verb débander (which also carries the additional sense of loosening bands or ties) could, like analysis, be used to name deconstruction. The cutting down of erections, like the cutting of penises that is circumcision, therefore allegorizes deconstruction. In fact, if Derrida suggests replacing “essence,” or “being,” with with hard-ons—“I propose that one try everywhere to replace the verb to be with the verb to band erect [bänder]” (G G133; 186)—then the term débander becomes equivalent to the analysis of “essence,” and, thus, to deconstruction “itself.”

But beyond this dis-placement of the phallogocentric by bringing down erections, deconstruction could also be called a queering through what Derrida calls “homosexual enantiosis” (G H224), a homosexual putting into opposition that understands the two elements of a binary as a sort of homosexual couple: “And if the sexual difference as opposition relieves [relève/raises up] difference, the opposition, conceptuality itself, is homosexual. It begins to become such when the sexual differences efface themselves and determine themselves as the difference” (G H223; 312). Derrida then allows this homosexual couple to mate: “[T]he copula couples, mates [accouple] the pair, draws closer in the same ligament (Band) the thing and the attribute thus becoming party again to Sein” (G H67). The copula (that is, the verb to be) binds (bandez) what it couples; by making this erection literal, Derrida unties (débande) and undoes the essentialized ties signified through the copula. If his reading of Hegel teases out the heterosexuality of Truth and the dialectic, the going limp that happens once Hegel’s erections touch Gener’s penises results in a queering of all these terms and, in the case of Christianity, a reversal of Hegel’s narrative of religious
progress, a reversal that renders it Jewish. Since Derrida associates the double bande with the double bind—and what better definition for the aporia, i.e., the figure of an irresolvable question or problem so favored by Derrida—the double bande that is Glas (a rubbing together of Genet’s penises and Hegel’s erections) graphically enacts a (very male, admittedly) queering of the dialectic, one whose deconstruction of binaries is, quite literally, emasculated.

In her essay, “The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary,” Judith Butler theorizes, through readings of several texts by Freud and Lacan, the installment of the penis in the imaginary as an erotogenic site. The penis is projected onto a bodily surface made (w)hole via a chain of signification originating in the gaping hole of a toothache:

Freud’s discussion began with the line from Wilhelm Busch, “the jaw-tooth’s aching hole,” a figure that stages a certain collision of figures, a punctured instrument of penetration, an inverted vagina dentata, anus, mouth, orifice in general, the spectre of the penetrating instrument penetrated. Insofar as the tooth, as that which bites, cuts, breaks through, and enters is that which is itself already entered, broken into, it figures an ambivalence that, it seems, becomes the source of pain analogized with the male genitals a few pages later. This figure is immediately likened to other body parts in real or imagined pain, and is then replaced and erased by the prototypical genitals. This wounded instrument of penetration can only suffer under the ideal of its own invulnerability, and Freud attempts to restore its imaginary power by installing it first as prototype and then as originary site of erotogenization.  

It is through this process, which requires the denial or erasure of the signifying chain leading back from the penis to a gaping hole, that the penis becomes “phallic.” Derrida’s textual penises, however, which are also at least in part autobiographical, openly acknowledge

and eroticize their gaping wounds, still fresh with blood. His body is “in pieces,” as Butler might say (LP 83); it conjures up the specters of its wounds.

With so many penises on the pages of Derrida’s writing, one might wonder whether, instead of deconstructing phallogocentrism, as I have suggested, these penises reinforce a phallic from which they cannot be dissociated.18 While my comments on Derrida’s penises might at first glance seem to contradict feminist critiques of such understandings of castration, it is my hope that they will instead help constitute a response to second-wave feminist Germaine Greer’s call, made nearly forty years ago but arguably still relevant today: “women must humanize the penis, take the steel out of it and make it flesh again.”19 I hope my comments here contribute to such a feminist writing about the penis, as well as to the already rich engagement with Derrida on the part of a number of feminists.20

Derrida’s penis, then, is haunted, but in The Post Card, it also haunts: “P.S. I have again overlooked them with colors, look I made up [maquillé] our couple, do you like it? Doubtless you will not be able to decipher the tattoo on plato’s prosthesis, the wooden third leg, the phantom-member that he is warming up under Socrates’ ass” (PC 64: 71). Cut off from its biological roots, the “penis” can circulate; by cutting it off, Derrida transforms it into a “dildo.” This dildo, like the numerous penile pre-texts he plays with (Rousseau’s in Of Grammatology, Genet’s in Glas, Plato’s in The Post Card) is an avatar of Derrida’s autobiographical “penis” in “Circumfession,” a

20. For more feminist writing on the penis, see Nancy K. Miller, “My Father’s penis,” in Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts (New York: Routledge, 1991), 143–47. See also Hélène Cixous, Portrait de Jacques Derrida en Jeune Saint Juif (Paris: Galilée, 2001), where she literally writes on “Circumfession” by reproducing entire passages of it onto which she writes commentary by hand. Figuratively, then, she is writing on Derrida’s penis.
fictional penis or root that stands in for Derrida’s fictional roots. In *Glas*, this prosthetic penis, a “prosthesis that **bands erect** [**bande**] all alone” (G 139; 194), also stands up to the erection of the Hegelian dialectic: “[E]very thesis is (**bands erect** [**bande**]) a prosthesis” (G 168; 235). The subtitle of *Monolingualism of the Other*—i.e., *The Prosthesis of Origins*—further associates this dildo with roots. Since in French, the Greek prefix *pro*- becomes *pro*-; the subtitle not only transforms Derrida’s “root(s)” into a “dildo”; it also names this deconstructivist understanding of “origins” as a fiction that involves putting (*thesis*) forth (*pro*—), that is, putting them in front (where the penis presumably is on the male body), putting them at the start.

And yet, the après-coup construction of origins, with which this essay begins, puts in front only by looking back (through a *return* to origins that is the roots narrative): “I am accessible, legible, visible only in a rearview mirror [rétroviseur]” (G 84; 117). And if what is in front is such an obsession in “Circumfession,” *Glas, The Post Card*, and *Monolingualism*, Derrida also derives great pleasure from putting it in back, in the/his behind. It is from behind, after all, that Plato sticks his pen(is) into Socrates’ “inkwell”:

> It is too obvious, to use your words as always, that S. does not see P. who sees S., but (and here is the truth of philosophy) only *from the back*. There is only the back, seen from the back, in what is written, such is the final word. Everything is played out in *retro*, and *a tergo* . . . At the very most, dipping his pen, or more sensuously one of his fingers, into that which has the office of inkwell (attached, I have cut out for you the calamus [le calame] and the orifice of said inkwell . . .). . . . (PC 48; 55)

It is only by becoming behind and bottom that Derrida inserts his pro(s)thetic root(s) into his corpus:

> [E]verything is always attached *de dos, from the back*, written, described from behind. *A tergo.* I am *already* [déjà: also D.J.] (dead) signifies that I am behind [derrière]. Absolutely behind, the *Derrière* that will have never been seen from the front, the *Déjà* that nothing will have preceded, which therefore conceived and gave birth to itself, but as a cadaver or glorious body. To be behind is to
be before all—in a rupture of symmetry. I cut myself off, I entrench myself—behind—I bleed [je saigne] at the bottom of my text. (G G84)²¹

A bit like “Socrates [who] is having his period” (PC 133), Derrida transforms that centuries old anti-semitic trope of the menstruating Jewish man (itself often associated with the blood of circumcision) into a queer figure for deconstruction. The wound of Jewish identity that heals nonetheless keeps on bleeding as a sign of the covenant (alliance) that ruptures the ring of the an(nul)us. By taking it (up the ass, offered up as a sacrifice), Derrida gives us what is potentially the most explicit definition for what it might mean to use queer as a verb. And if queer is often considered to be that which challenges identity, Derrida’s articulation of deconstruction as a queering nonetheless retains a sexualized identity whose root(s) is/are the site of a “Jewissance,” the pleasure of a deconstructivist analysis that un-ties, questions, and cuts down (débande) the very identity it erects.

²¹. All brackets in this passage are Leavey and Rand’s.