A Man for All Seasons: Derrida-cum-“Queer Theory” or the Limits of “Performativity”¹

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Is it perverse, a distorting reversal of how things should be, to start writing without quite knowing whether the subject is a relevant one, or even if there is a subject to be dealt with in the first place? The opening lines of Robert Bolt’s play, *A Man for All Seasons*, are spoken by the Common Man and read thusly: “It is perverse! To start a play made up of Kings and Cardinals in speaking costumes and intellectuals with embroidered mouths, with me.”² To be sure, if one suspects the kings, cardinals, and intellectuals, not to mention the queens, who presume that deconstruction can contribute to “queer theory,” to be wearing little more than “speaking costumes,” one risks placing oneself in the position of the common man, at least when seen from the perspective that frames the speech of “embroidered mouths.” When the “I” appears at the end of the line—“with me”—the words fall flat. And yet, it would seem that a minimal conviction is required to speak meaningfully about a subject, encapsulating not a sense of the agreeable, or of practical competence, but of *truth*, of that which lies beyond personal interest and pragmatism, which, in the words of the play’s main character, is the interest of the “merest plumber” (MS 70). And if at this point already the notion of meaningfulness were to be contested, one could also put it differently and say that, unless one assumes that

“queer theory” and a deconstructive approach to it amount to something, one had better keep one’s mouth shut.

But then it is in the name of conviction—of that “sense of selfhood” Bolt wishes to develop without resorting to “magic” (MS xiii)—that one must, perhaps, try to speak about “Derrida” and “queer theory”—in order, that is, to turn against those who place the value of theory in what they call “queering,” an act or an activity designed to undermine or to ignore the possibility of remaining true to oneself. For one cannot remain true to oneself only for the time being and in anticipation of further change.

In “Critically Queer,” a chapter of her book Bodies That Matter, Judith Butler describes the appropriation of the injurious term “queer” as the subversive “queering” of a “prior usage,” as an attempt to use the term against the grain of prevailing norms and their negative effect, itself a form of “queering” (“the shaming taboo which ‘queers’”). This militant inversion (which is said to reveal something about the distortions at the origin of “presentism”—of a law or a logic that dissimulates its own “historicity” [CQ 227] and draws its “force” and its “authority” from this dissimulation) is inseparable from a dismantling of the subject and appears to leave no room for conviction. Indeed, it identifies “will” and “choice” with the “magic of the name” (CQ 228). Butler’s argument is not based on the immanent determinism of the substance but on a version of the quasi-transcendental function Derrida attributes to iterability, or, in the words of Butler, on “performativity” as “a relation of being implicated in that which one opposes” (CQ 241). Does this mean that a move against a “critical” idea of “queer theory” demands a move against deconstruction as well? In this case, it would make sense to speak of “Derrida and queer theory,” even though the aim here would be to oppose deconstruction’s contribution to the development of such theory. The trivial assumption would be that the proper name of the philosopher stands for a thought powerful enough to warrant the construal of concepts in domains other than philosophy, and that the queer theorist’s appeal to deconstruction is

not entirely misguided. Of course, opposing “Derrida and queer theory” in the manner proposed would not amount to yet another appropriation of the term “queer,” but rather mark the limits of co-implication, or of “performativity” itself. Perhaps the resources for such opposition could even be found in aspects of deconstruction overseen or neglected by the queer theorist.

So, can “Derrida” be called a man for all seasons because deconstruction irrigates as many fields, old and new, as can be cultivated during a particular time of the intellectual calendar, “queer theory” being but one example of such fruitfulness of spirit? If one were to answer this question in the affirmative, one would still have to establish how “seasonal” deconstruction itself is in the end, and whether its contribution to the demarcation and development of a field of study called “queer theory” is based only on a selective reading of Derrida. And what if a queer theorist wanted to argue that, being a man for all seasons—a philosopher whose versatility attests to the richness of his thought—, there is indeed something genuinely “queer” about “Derrida,” something unrestricted by, say, the rule of “binary oppositions” and thus close to—the truth?

Would this be an example of a “queering” of “Derrida,” if not an “outing”? Would “Derrida” even appear to be the role model of all “queering,” back to back with Butler, a backroom boy of “queer theory”? Or is “Derrida,” on the contrary, a man for all seasons in the sense of Bolt’s play: i.e., a philosopher on whom one can rely because, truthful to himself, to the “behind” of deconstruction, which is not a Hinterwelt but this world here, and not afraid of standing for his convictions, he underlines the relevance of some sort of absolute—the “undeconstructible”—that cannot be reduced to “historicity” or “performativity”? What kind of queer theorist would be able to embrace such a man? A theorist of “performativity,” queer or not, could interpret the accumulation of questions in this very paragraph as an “enactment” of Butler’s “critical” queer theory, for the first section of “Critically Queer,” which fills a page and a half of the book, contains, on a quick count, no less than fifteen interrogative clauses, some of them running over several lines. (This predilection for constantly raising questions, for “querying,” however, stands in sharp contrast to the assertive style of much of the text. The passage on the possibility of saying “I,” for example, takes its cue from Althusser’s theory of interpellation [CQ 225], yet
does not engage in a discussion of arguments or counterarguments. Maybe the proliferation of question marks springs from an argument that tends to proceed by way of assertions? But these assertions call on a number of philosophers and theorists for their own backing. In “queer theory,” it seems, much of the “theory” is derivative, drawing on ideas developed elsewhere—in the instance of Butler, by the likes of Nietzsche, Foucault, Althusser and, of course, Derrida. Or would a queer theorist, especially if he is a young thing, claim that the ideas of “theory,” to which he appeals, come into their own in “queer theory” only?) Perhaps the most pressing issue, then, is to determine what it is that makes theory into a “queer” affair, always in view of “Derrida’s” joining the party, or being spotted among the hosts.

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When one looks for a definition of the word “queer” in Butler’s text, not only does one not find much in the way of a clarification, but one discovers that the word is used less and less frequently as the chapter progresses. About midway through, it disappears almost completely and is replaced by the word “homosexual.” It remains unclear whether the author wishes to suggest that both terms can and should be used as synonyms, or whether the shift is due to an implicit criticism of the new usage of the term, or whether “queerness” is to be understood as a species to be included within “homosexuality,” even though its show-stopping appearance could affect the very definition of the generic name. While at the start of “Critically Queer,” the word “queer” is said to “appeal to a younger generation who want to resist the more institutionalized and reformist politics sometimes signified by ‘lesbian and gay’” (CQ 228)—it thereby refers to the contention that there can be “sexual difference within homosexuality” (CQ 240) and, presumably, within heterosexuality, too—, later on, in the same chapter, a parallelism is construed between “gender” and “feminism,” on one hand, and “sexuality” and “queer theory,” on the other (CQ 240), as if Butler wished to indicate that “sexuality” or, more exactly, the “politics” of “sexual difference” in (hetero- and) homosexuality, constitutes the very object of a theory termed “queer.” It should be noted that immediately after giving the only explicit and “positive” definition of “queerness” her chapter provides, Butler casts a doubt on the
resistance of the “younger generation” to the institution of “lesbian and gay” sexual politics and the ensuing transformation of the revolutionary impulse into a strategy of reformism, by stressing that, in the early nineties, “queerness” remained a “predominantly white movement” and represented “a false unity of women and men” (CQ 228). Hence, to be “critically queer” means, for Butler, to engage in a form of self-criticism—the older “gay and lesbian” generation turns against itself in the form of a “younger generation”—and to be critical in the face of the discriminatory and dissimulating effects of “queer” critique itself—the “younger generation” also turns against itself, perhaps even initiating “a resurgence of both feminist and anti-racist mobilization within gay and lesbian politics” (CQ 228), thereby truly inheriting the legacy of the preceding emancipatory movements. In a way, Butler situates herself on both sides of this critical divide, flagging a willingness to give up the term “queer” itself (CQ 229) in order to resist succumbing to the “magic of the name.” The “critically queer” agent, then, assumes the necessity and confronts the contingency of exclusions. But unless emancipatory movements shed their respective specificity and become one unified movement of liberation, a residue will keep alerting the critical agent formally known as “queer” to the urgency of throwing yet another name into the political struggle which must somehow remain linked to a sexual difference shared, in whatever form, by both the generation of queerness and the gay and lesbian generation. The problem here is similar to the one encountered in “identity politics.”

If the critical import of an emancipatory movement does not suffice to supply a criterion that allows one to distinguish a “gay identity” from other identities, then those who vindicate such an identity need to have recourse to a particular understanding, interpretation, construction of sexuality, perhaps even to some idea of sexuality “itself.” So, what about sexuality, queer, gay, lesbian, in Derrida’s work?

Sooner rather than later, the gay or queer detective will

4. [See, e.g., Carolyn D’Cruz, Identity Politics in Deconstruction: Calculating with the Incalculable (New York: Routledge, 2016). —Ed.]

have come across the passage in *The Post Card* where “Derrida” alludes to a discussion on the lawn of Balliol College, which took place in June of 1977. The words enclosed in brackets are likely to catch the private’s eye: “A (very handsome) young male student thought he could provoke me and also, I believe, seduce me a bit by asking why I did not commit suicide.”6 “Derrida,” it seems, has no other choice but to commit suicide or to dress up as a girl, to paraphrase the Catalan writer, Francesc Pujols.7 Having thus been put on the right track, and supposing he is patient enough to browse through the following one hundred pages, the gay or queer detective will hardly be able to ask for more evidence than the two sentences written down on the 7th of October of the same year. On the page, the sentences are separated by a blank: “I will be on the floor, lying on my back / Ne laisse pas trainer cette bande [Don’t leave this tape around.]” (PC 129 [118]). Doubtless, in the immediate context of this postcard, the gay or queer detective will have little choice but to translate the word *bande* with “tape”: the second sentence demands for a tape not to be left to its own devices, as it were, lying around, abandoned, allowed to wander off. And yet, having read Derrida’s previous book, *Glas*, not only will the first postcard entry remind the detective of an expression in a novel by Jean Genet which fascinates and “seduces” Derrida (“girls blond as boys”),8 but s/he will be very much aware of the attention Derrida pays to the words *bander* and *bande* in the writer’s wake, to the binding, squeezing, pressing, tightening force that, in French, permits the verb to be used in the


sense of “having an erection” (G 30 [20]).

“Derrida” is on his back, then, and, in a scene of reciprocal seduction, asks the other not to waste his hard-on. “Don’t go home with your hard-on / It will only drive you insane.” Is “Derrida” entering queer territory, yet? Perhaps. But has he entered the territory of “queer theory”? This could only be so if, for example, the other’s erection is connected to the “logic” of “anthérection,” a neologism Derrida invents in Glas to combine castration and fertility in language, or to name the simultaneous enabling and disenabling of an erection (G 157 [138]). But wouldn’t such a queer erection stretch the limits of queer theory beyond a sexuality to which the term “queer” could even be applied meaningfully? Wouldn’t it make all sexuality “queer,” in a way, and either dissolve the specificity of queer theory into a more general theory of sexual difference, or else dissolve the very object of theory, and hence “theory” itself, queer or otherwise?

Having let “Derrida” in—and, as a consequence, reached a limit of queer theory—, the theorist can still choose a third and last option before vanishing. S/he can, if s/he feels generous, declare the members of the queer generation to be the avant-garde of sexuality, or sexual difference: “We’re here, we’re queer, so get fuckin’ used to it.” However, if by opposing hetero- and homosexuality, sexuality can be curtailed, and sexual difference reified, if, in other words, an avant-garde is needed to counter the violence inflicted upon “queerness” by the reformism of “gays and lesbians” and the more obvious conservatism of heterosexuals, the “logic of anthérection,” which the queer agent or activist wishes to exploit in favor of a transgression of “binary oppositions,” demonstrates precisely that there can be no transgression without a regression that cuts through the intention to liberate sexuality from its constraints, or that each binding and unbinding is hopelessly caught within a double-bind. The turn to deconstruction, then, leaves the queer theorist with that “impossible homosexuality,” invoked by Derrida in “circumfession,” never sure whether he is touching grapes or balls, the balls of the cousin with a queer name, Claude, or the bunch of grapes snapped by Augustinus, the young devil, and planted in the pants of the

9. [For more on the wordplay in Glas around the words bander and bande, see Jarrod Hayes, “Derrida’s Queer Root(s),” in this volume. —Ed.]
Queer theorists will have to decide, again and again, whether this undecidability becomes a source of mourning and melancholy for them, or, on the contrary, of unexpected pleasures that are to be had under the terrible threat of loss and severance, not exactly a gay and queer prospect, or, perhaps, all the more so: for if, according to deconstruction, the possibility of the possible is to be sought in the impossible, i.e., if the possible requires the impossible to prove itself and to be possible in the first place, then does Derrida’s invocation of an “impossible homosexuality” not advocate for an ultra-“queerness”—so utterly queer that it can almost not be called queer any longer?

Indeed, Derrida always seems to be going one step too far to keep the queer theorist happy. “Queerness” can’t catch up with theory, philosophy, thinking, since the appeal to “ultra-queerness,” and the insistence on a double-bind, blur the distinctions on which the queer agent depends, between one subject and the other, one object and the other, one theory and the other. In the case of the appeal to “ultra-queerness,” it does not really matter whether the move is made in the direction of an “impossible homosexuality,” or towards a level of generality that can be detected in both the idea of a sexuality that has not yet solidified into a dual relationship, and the concept of writing “from behind.”

To overcome the difficulties which the various forms of “ultra-queerness” present them, queer theorists might attempt to identify with a part larger than the whole, and install themselves in “ultra-queerness” itself. But in so doing they would merely fall prey to the illusion that such a part could still be distinguished from the whole which it transcends.

As far as sexuality is concerned, Derrida develops, or rather outlines in very broad sketches, the idea of a “sexuality” that would need to be grasped conceptually before the solidification of difference into “duality” occurs, in an essay on sexual and ontological difference.

in Heidegger. Yet if any terminological specificity is to be retained, this sexual difference is no more “queer” than it is homo- or hetero-sexual. The concept of writing “from behind”—the idea of originary traces structuring experience itself and therefore barred from sight—can be traced to *Glas*, and is also at the center of the first part of *The Post Card*. A text on writing—which runs down a column inserted within the right-hand column of the book on Hegel and Genet—features a clear allusion to “sexuality,” even though its scope exceeds all narrow views on the question of sexual difference: “Everything is always started from behind, written and unwritten in the back. *A tergo*. I am *already* (dead) means that I am *behind*. Absolutely behind, this ‘behind’ will never have been seen from the front and this ‘already’ will not have been preceded by anything, having itself conceived and given birth to itself, but as a corpse or a glorious body. To be behind is to be before everything else and hence to break with symmetry” (*G* 97 [84]).

There is a sort of statement in *The Post Card* that resonates with this extract from *Glas*. It comes after a parenthesis which points towards “*le vrai de la philosophie,*” what is true about philosophy and true about a postcard depicting Plato as he stands *behind* Socrates who himself appears to be writing: “This is the last word: in what is written, all is in the *back* and everything is seen from behind” (*PC* 55 [48]). It is true that Derrida does not miss the opportunity here to suggest that Plato is


fucking Socrates (PC 35 [30]); but he does so only to interpret the postcard mentioned as an allegory of the “initial catastrophe” (PC 25 [20]) that makes it difficult to find any guidance, or orientation, in thought by settling on what comes first and what second. One is too far ahead because one is too far behind, coming and going between two extremes of “ultra-queerness,” the past and future of something too queer and not queer enough to be truly queer. Derrida’s point, if he has one, is about the disturbance that any attempt to introduce distinctions in view of creating some order, must take into account. There is nothing specifically “queer” about this.

Surely, after reading *The Post Card*, it can be tempting to say that Derrida’s relation to philosophy is, like Deleuze’s, one of “buggery,” of taking a philosopher from behind to make him scream and beg for more, or to make him a child in an act of “immaculate conception.” At the same time, though, it remains undecidable, or indiscernible, who, exactly, is behind the “buggery,” behind the backroom, and whether there is anybody there at all. No “queer” theorist can claim the privileged position for herself.

Perhaps one must conclude from this brief inquiry into “Derrida’s” place in queer theory that there is no such “theory”; that theory or philosophy or thinking have no choice but to go the extra mile—traditionally towards the Idea, Concept, Transcendentalism, or Being—where queer theorists can’t afford to go without renouncing their own “identity,” or “name,” long before they have had a chance to put it into circulation and to the test; and that the impossibility of a “queer theory” explains, on one hand, why queer theorists tend to borrow their ideas from theories existing already, and, on the other, why, as Butler recognizes without thematizing it, queer theory is, in fact, a queer “politics,” a *manner of turning*, with a particular interest in mind, ideas coming from elsewhere against other ideas. But has a queer theorist as such ever been capable of penetrating “Derrida” and getting him pregnant? Not that “Derrida” hasn’t asked for it . . . It comes as no surprise then that the double task

13. The translation does not render the allusion to sexual intercourse in the expression “s’envoyer.”
Butler assigns to the queer theorist reveals itself to be rather modest, though not undemanding: a historical or [Foucauldian] genealogical investigation into both the “formation of homosexualities” and the “deformative and misappropriative power that the term [‘queer’] currently enjoys” (CQ 229). While a number of discoveries may be had from such a course of studies, which treat “queerness” as an object rather than a subject of theory, the creation of a conceptual and theoretical framework for carrying out the queer theorist’s double task is more the result of an amalgamation of existing ideas than proof of an inventive genius, at least if Butler’s essay can serve as a reference here.

But can one be content with replacing “queer theory” with “queer politics”? When Butler unearths her theoretical resources, she ends up merging the idea of a constitution of the subject through interpellation with the Derridean idea of iterability as a movement of both idealization and alteration. The argument that ideality requires a repetition that shows itself to be inseparable from an altering interruption, leads Butler to conceive the “I,” instituted by way of a previous interpellation, as being simultaneously more powerful than the I and exposed to uncontrollable change: “The ‘I’ is thus a citation of the place of the ‘I’ in speech, where that place has a certain priority and anonymity with respect to the life it animates: it is the historically revisable possibility of a name that precedes and exceeds me, but without which I cannot speak” (CQ 226). To the extent that the ideal “I”—the I which is relatively independent of the I or “the life it animates”—offers a certain stability, engendering even a “presentist” illusion, the theorist must count on it as a “discursive rallying point” (CQ 230), if s/he wants to become a queer agent. This fatal necessity is also the reason why the theorist, once s/he becomes a queer agent, must continuously be reminiscent of the “historicity” and the “contingency” of the “I” to which s/he lays claim. In short, to be queer means, by definition, to be “critically queer.” Of course, this is not much more than a variation on the general insight underlying Butler’s line of thought, namely, that to be an “I” means to be an I. So, if, as Butler suggests, the “presentist” illusion culminates in the “view of the subject as the exclusive origin or owner of what is said,” then the role of the I whose life is animated by the “I” seems to consist in animating the “I”’s life in turn, or to bring to the fore that the “I” has a life, too,
and is more than merely an “I.” Butler deploys the “I” and the I against the “I” and the I. When the ideality of the “I” assists the theorist in becoming a “queer” agent, it is deployed against the vagaries of the I; conversely, the I is deployed against the “presentist” illusion engendered by the ideality of the “I” when its mobility assists queer agents in their critical endeavors. To be queer therefore means to be able to switch between an “I” and an I in order to direct one I against the other. Again, this definition is not much more than the application of the more general definition of the I. There is nothing at all queer, then, about the fact that it is precisely here that an affinity between “Derrida” and “critical” queer theory begins to emerge. For just as deconstruction often keeps playing off one side of things against the other, incompatible or incommensurable side, constant confrontation seems to be at the origin of queer theory as Butler understands it. “Life,” it would seem, is never to be found where one looks for it, neither in the “I,” nor in the I.

Returning, at this stage, to the play, A Man for All Seasons, two lines spoken by the main character, Thomas More, could be quoted to illustrate the point further. “An oath is made of words! It may be possible to take it” (MS 78), More affirms, against the advocates of intended meaning, the linguistic “presentists.” But against the detractors of “presentism,” who encourage More to “say the words of the oath” and yet “think otherwise,” he affirms that, “when a man takes an oath, he’s holding his own self in his own hands” (MS 87). What is striking, from the angle of this rebuke, is that in “Critically Queer,” Butler has a lot to say about the “I” and comparatively little about the I on which, as has become clear, queer theory must rely, too. The self to which the character in the play appeals, the “man for all seasons,” is not an “I,” nor a “discursive rallying point,” nor a “necessary error of identity” (CQ 229), dissimulated and deployed in a political struggle out of some necessity. And the appeal itself is not, in More’s own words, “a complicated gesture learnt from books” ((MS 57), which betrays the ability to attend. The distinction to be made in this context is one between an opposition that shows itself as inherently strategic and an altogether different kind of opposition, one rooted in conviction, rather than self-interest: “I will not give in, because I oppose it—I do—not my pride, not my spleen, nor any other of my appetites but I do—I!” (MS 77). This, perhaps, is where Derrida parts company.
with the queer theorist of Butlerian descent or inspiration. For the notion of justice as “undeconstructible,” which he introduces in his discussion of law, conveys a sense of urgency to the “impossible” negotiation between what is relentlessly submitted to deconstruction and what remains in essence undeconstructible,¹⁵ which is, to all appearances, lacking from “Critically Queer.” Butler knows only of an I in need of the support of an “I” haunted by bad faith; as a consequence, critical queer theory invokes an I that is virtually absent from it.

The play, *A Man for All Seasons*, presents a situation so extreme that, were More to make his conviction into an object of rebellious affirmation, or give it up entirely, to save his life and spare his family the ordeal of having to flee the country, he would inevitably destroy what is at stake—if not the very fact that something *is* at stake—and surrender to compromise, corruption, and the hardening of the “thoughts of the heart” (MS 100). Here, the I must bow neither to its precariousness, nor to dogmatism, not even temporarily. As extreme as the situation in the play is, it is not artificial; the radical nature of the *choice* forced upon More has the virtue of disclosing that, for as long as something is still at stake, the idea of a self equipped with a sense of things that matter, and an understanding that not everything can matter equally, must not be renounced and should not be confused with the imposition of a conventional and conformist fabrication.

And yet, does such an interpretation of the play not overlook its most blatant feature, namely, that it is performed, that its words are placed within quotation marks, as it were, regardless of whether one considers such an alteration to be the “determined modification of a general citationality,” or not?¹⁶ Can one even be convinced by the display of conviction of a *dramatis personæ* without taking into account that it must be the play itself which

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demands to be convincing here, to be taken seriously, and that, as the art historian Michael Fried famously claims, conviction, at its deepest, is sustained by an instantaneous “presentness” at odds with theater?  

Perhaps the obliqueness signaled by the quotation marks could be regarded as a reminder of the impossibility, for the viewer, of ever seeing the object which the self is making—as if, under less extreme circumstances than in A Man for All Seasons, conviction had a much more fluid aspect. Inasmuch as the self is moved to engage in something beyond the prospect of a final gain, a lasting reward, a resulting fulfillment, and that the reality of its existence depends on such a commitment, it is making an object invisible to the eye, for “God’s remembrance,” to use a rather enigmatic expression Walter Benjamin employs, whereby God should not be represented as an instance of punishment and compensation, of erasure and elevation. “One might,” Benjamin writes in “The Task of the Translator,” “speak of an unforgettable life or moment even if all men had forgotten it. If the nature of such a life or moment required that it be unforgotten, that predicate would imply not a falsehood but merely a claim unfulfilled by men, and probably also a reference to a realm in which it is fulfilled: God’s remembrance.”  

While many, unconvinced, will find this reference too comforting and reassuring to be true, asking how an existential and a logical claim can be equated, the ones who refuse to recognize a ruining subterfuge in the talk of “God’s remembrance” will see it as an expression of the fact that life and existence, too, are answerable for claims which overshoot “historicity,” if any “historical” behavior is to be conceived of meaningfully, not just as an arbitrary projection of meaning.

Those whom Derrida does not convince say that his having an impact in some quarters of philosophy and a number of related and unrelated disciplines, such as “queer theory,” reveals nothing, or only that he is not to be trusted. Those, however, who are...

convincing, among them, one assumes, the “critical queer theorist” suspicious of, or oblivious to, *conviction*, are incited to engage in a new making of an object that will have to remain devoid of an appropriate and appropriating predicate.