

JEAN GENET'S QUEER ORIGINS: A READING OF *QUERELLE DE BREST*

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Abstract

This article engages with debates in queer theory by attempting to look beyond the dominant trend of constructionism and interrogating the possibility of queer origins in the work of Jean Genet. In a reading of his novel *Querelle de Brest*, I seek to demonstrate that queer is located less in the self-assumption of subjectivity and more in the act of queer sex bestowing its agents with a series of metonymically substitutable role positions. Utilizing resources from psychoanalysis, I argue that Genet's novel is not a homophobic fantasy but rather an empowering narrative whose focus on betrayal can be aligned with the psychoanalytic notion of perversion as disavowal, allowing both Genet to be recognized as a salutary queer writer, and psychoanalysis to be wrested from the hostility with which it is received in queer-theoretical circles.

L'écriture, passion de l'origine, cela doit s'entendre aussi par la voie du génitif subjectif. C'est l'origine elle-même qui est passionnée, passive et passée d'être écrite. Ce qui veut dire inscrite. L'inscription de l'origine, c'est sans doute son être-écrit mais c'est aussi son être-inscrit dans un système dont elle n'est qu'un lieu et une fonction.¹

What **could be the connection between 'origin' and 'queer'?** If writing, as Derrida would have it, entails a necessary inscription of origin, if this inscription is in itself inscribed or 'represented' in the incumbent inscriptions and representations of identity, relationality, sexuality, politics, all that which comes to be seen in the writing as its implicit or explicit concerns, as the 'world' it conjures forth from the page, what **does 'queer writing' inscribe as (its) origin?** This is assuming that we already know what 'queer writing' could be, of course. Is it simply a case of adding an epithet so that, where we have 'queer writing', we also have 'queer origin'? Or is it rather that, in a more complex and more differentiated way, there is a kind of writing which inscribes (its) origin *in queer ways*, so that the origin itself comes to be inscribed as queer? Finally, can 'queer' be situated at, or as, the origin?

'Queer', of course, primarily refers to homosexuality, and it is precisely a question of how far *homosexuality* can be taken as an inscription of origin, the *originary* inscription without which the 'world' of Genet's novels is inaccessible and meaningless. If, however, this is the case, the 'queer origin' of

¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Ellipse', in *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris, Seuil, 1967), p. 431.

Genet's writings cannot simply be held to stand for their origination in (his) homosexuality, avowed and paramount as this may be in almost all his writings. 'Homosexuality', and 'the homosexual' cannot be situated at/as an origin and still mean what they mean in common usage, where they clearly perform a function as secondary categories in the field of sexuality, trailing behind the primary categories of heterosexuality. If, to anticipate my own argument, in Genet's text a homosexual 'identity' is located at/as the origin of the inscription and representation of identity *per se*, we are clearly not speaking of the 'same' identity, nor the 'same' homosexuality as those articulated in non-'queer' texts. Lee Edelman rightly notes the aporia in that aspect of queer theory which seeks to investigate the representations of homosexual identity in texts: 'the interrogation of identity proceeds in the name of the identity it sets out to interrogate'.² Crucially, an investigation into the meaning and the origin of a 'queer identity', and thus of a 'queer relationality', or of a 'queer politics', needs to proceed from a point where the very notions of identity, relationality, politics, even more so the notion of 'queer' are yet to be decided, or even, more rigorously, they are structurally *undecidable*.

Genet's novels offer precisely such a viewpoint; though it may be easy to read homosexuality directly in almost all his characters, none of them, bar a few exceptions, are unequivocally referred to, or understand themselves as homosexual. He is, in Leo Bersani's accurate description, 'the least "gay-affirmative" writer' in an already limited canon, meaning that he is a writer not in the least prone to exhibiting 'positive' representations of homosexuality, a crime for which he has already been chastised by a certain brand of critics, for example Christopher Robinson.³ Genet's writings, in fact, are a fascinating (and particularly bloody) battleground on which to test the preoccupations of queer theory with the social construction of sexuality. 'Constructionist' theory asserts, after Foucault, that the category of 'homosexuality' is not a given, natural one but one constructed in specific historical and social conditions. Queer theory seeks to read the construction in the text, and thus to de-construct the edifice, disclosing it as a construct. However, this is done from the point of view, in Michael Warner's words, of 'every person who comes to a queer self-understanding', an understanding which is itself part of the construction it struggles to demolish.⁴ A 'queer self-understanding' inevitably implies

²*Homographesis* (London, Routledge, 1994), p. xv.

³Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 160–61. See also Christopher Robinson, *Scandal in the Ink* (London, Cassel, 1995), p. 59. Robinson finds Genet 'guilty of pandering to, intensifying, even giving new life to, the traditional heterosexual view of homosexuality as abnormal, morally depraved and socially destructive'. Robinson seems to be all too certain of what a 'positive', a genuinely 'homosexual' view of homosexuality would be, thus exhibiting the aporia identified by Edelman in a most exemplary manner.

⁴*Fear of a Queer Planet* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. xi.

the acceptance of the *origin* of self-understanding in the social construct, the acceptance, even the full-scale *adoption* of the term queer as it has been handed down from the construct. This is not to disparage the way in which 'queer' has been transformed as a tool against the construct; it is to note, in somewhat hurried terms, that 'queer self-understanding', as opposed to an oppressive 'straight' self-understanding, and in its participation in the overall structure of self-understanding, is but another brick in the construct of self-understanding — a 'queer' brick perhaps, a brick which can equally be used as part of the construct and as weapon against it, but a brick nonetheless. Constructionist theory assails the edifice, but leaves, if you will, the foundations intact.

Genet, on the contrary, appears to be not in the least concerned with constructs and bricks. The homosexual identity of Genet's heroes is highly problematized, not just as a *homosexual* identity but also as a homosexual *identity* — **it is the very concept of identity, of self-understanding as inscribed in the modern notion of the homogeneity of the subject that is assailed.** Of all of Genet's writings, it is *Querelle de Brest* which best demonstrates this frontal assault on the idea, or the construct, of the total subject.⁵ The main characters in the novel have definitely *not* come to a 'queer self-understanding', if by that we mean an acceptance of their being, essentially, homosexual — yet homosexuality, its sexual acts, its codes of relationality, is omnipresent, and it is this which prompts Genet's biographer, Edmund White, to write of *Querelle de Brest* as 'a violent story of homosexual love among heterosexual men'.⁶ This formulation may appear counterintuitive, but this precisely will prove to be its value, in that Genet's world is one in which 'homosexual love' proves to be a more fundamental predication than 'heterosexual man'. In a book where the only two avowed homosexuals are marginal characters, the Armenian whose murder gives the plot its prehistory, and Lieutenant Seblon, whose presence is best understood as the fantasmatic presence of Genet himself as an implied reader, homosexuality as a label and a category remains suspect and derided. *Querelle* says of the Armenian: 'Si c'est cela un pédé, ce n'est pas un homme' (p. 217).

The novel presents a very peculiar picture of masculinity, in relation to sexual contact between men; at a first glance, homosexuality takes on the eternal threat of emasculation, of becoming a woman: 'Si tant de haine . . . se répand sur ceux qu'entre matelots on nommait les tantouzes, c'est qu'évidemment (même s'ils ont des manières de femmes) ils cherchent à faire de vous une femme' (p. 214). In the presence of someone (the already feminized, already visible homosexual) who is soliciting their *masculine*

⁵*Querelle de Brest* (Paris, Gallimard, 1957). I am using this edition of the novel as it reprints the original first edition of 1947, rather than the truncated version which appeared in the *Œuvres complètes*. All references to the novel will hereafter be to a page number of this edition.

⁶*Jean Genet* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 168.

desire, the male macho characters feel they are themselves feminized. Far from being a simple homophobic designation of homosexuality as emasculation, this is Genet's inversion of the binary hierarchy (masculine/feminine) constitutive of male identity. It is the active, macho males in the novel, such as Nono and Mario who feel emasculated in the presence of a passive (if also quintessentially macho) male such as Querelle: 'en face de Robert, [Querelle's identical twin brother] Nono reprenait sa véritable virilité qu'il perdait un peu avec Querelle' (p. 110). The active, macho male finds himself, faced with his passive partner, in possession of a *supplementary*, and threatening, femininity. Interestingly, the passive macho male such as Querelle is hardly ever presented as having such doubts about his masculinity, even in the midst of homosexual encounters where he should, conventionally at least, feel emasculated or feminized simply by virtue of being penetrated. The passive role ceases to be understood as analogous to femininity, the active to masculinity and this constitutes a breakthrough in the conception of masculinity, along the lines of what Leo Bersani calls (in a discussion of child masturbation) 'the biological connection between male sexuality and surrender or passivity', a connection which is surely, and deliberately, bypassed in the normative patriarchal construction of masculinity.⁷

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of the role played by the very act of anal sex, traditionally (though not exclusively) linked to male homosexuality, in reversing and displacing the dominant cultural binaries of masculine and feminine, hetero- and homosexual. Since Genet is not forthcoming in giving his readers any material for the construction or demolition of homosexual identities, it is to the sex acts themselves that we must turn in an attempt to find the queer in Genet's texts. In Leo Bersani's words, 'while it is indisputably true that sexuality is always being politicized, the ways in which *having sex* politicizes are highly problematical'.⁸ Bersani himself has famously undertaken that project in relation to Genet's *Pompes Funèbres*; I do not wish to repeat his reading, brilliant though it is, but merely to distinguish between two ways in which anal sex is central (even perhaps *originary*) in Genet's world.⁹ **The first could be called the eccentric centrality of anality itself. Although by no means averse to phallus-worship, Genet seems to be much more concerned with the anus as a source of pleasure, and thus, following Bersani's point, as a locus of political implications. Genet's muse, the origin of his world, is the anus.** The pleasure associated with anal sex and the anus is a pleasure situated at the *origin* of sexual pleasure as such — the Freudian model of anal eroticism preceding

⁷*Homos*, p. 103.

⁸'Is the Rectum a Grave?' in Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism* (London, MIT Press, 1988).

⁹See *Homos*, pp. 151–72.

post-oedipal genital, *differentiated* eroticism shows as much. Anal pleasure is a pleasure which comes *before* sexual difference and the genital pleasure which it brings in its wake. Queer theorists have been attentive to the fact that anal pleasure is located in a region which comes before the formation of a (sexually differentiated) subject, and its continuation in male homosexual pleasure signifies, if anything, that the homosexual 'subject', inasmuch as it can be said to be constituted by difference and desire, is located in a pre-differentiated, and thus 'pre-subjective' gap. As Lee Edelman puts it, the homosexual 'subject' is situated within 'the very nondifferentiation from which the active, masculine subject ... differentiates himself'.¹⁰ This notion serves as a convincing exegesis of the remarkable passages in *Querelle* where Genet lets out Madame Lysiane's frustration at the narcissistic doubling of Querelle and his brother (both her lovers), undifferentiated, one *and* two at the same time. The sight of the two of them fighting is the sight of the same fighting itself. Lysiane has only one way to inscribe an order (and a concept) of 'primarity' in their closed world of difference-within-the-same — this, and it should come as no surprise, is the size of their penis: 'Enfin Madame Lysiane connut un peu de paix, tant cette verge était différente de celle de Robert. Les deux frères, enfin, se distinguaient là' (p. 239). Querelle himself, although mostly a passive homosexual in terms of behaviour, is not concerned with phallic ostentation, seemingly more content to remain within the sphere of anal pleasure.

The second aspect of anal sex which illuminates Genet's conception of homosexuality bears on the significance of the act itself as that which alone grounds any notion of homosexuality. With the exception of the Armenian and Seblon, no one in *Querelle* is homosexual, but everyone engages in anal sex. Even though it is understandable that this be interpreted as a homophobic fantasy world where all the macho heterosexuals have endless anal sex with each other, seemingly disregarding any notion of a 'queer self-understanding' as a potential prerequisite to their pleasures, it is more tempting to read Genet's preference for the *act*, rather than the *agent* as another indication that homosexuality is not to be found in a subject *stricto sensu*. The act (of anal sex) does not conjure forth constituted, self-aware subjects; on the contrary, it serves as the subject's narcissistic self-division, as when Nono, having sex with Querelle, learns 'ce qu'est l'amour: conscience de la séparation d'un seul, conscience d'être divisé, et que votre vous-même vous contemple' (p. 67). Rather, anal sex constitutes the *event* which allows the characters

¹⁰ *Homographesis*, p. 108. Bersani has also written persuasively, in 'Is the Rectum a Grave?', about the gay man's wish to be (anally) violated as a kind of reversed operation of the death-drive, an active renunciation of power which brings him in contact with the powerless being he was before differentiation, the Oedipus complex, and subjectivity 'happened'.

to be part of Genet's web of fantasmatic/masturbatory relations, allows them to be characters. What is more, inasmuch as anal sex between men can be said to be related to some form of homosexuality, even if this is not the form of a homosexual subject who recognizes himself as such, the form of this homosexuality is no longer one tied to the subject, and the incumbent problematics of identity and difference which befall it, but to the *event* of the act itself. Genet's contention is that queer *is not*, queer *happens*.

However, when considering the relations established with the act of anal sex, we are again faced with the problem of roles — it would be true to say that equally important as the fact of the sexual act is the role one plays in it. Thus far we have seen how Genet paradoxically bestows on the passive men such as Querelle 'more' masculinity than their active partners. However, it is very difficult to speak of active/passive roles in Genet's novels, while at the same time it is inevitable and necessary. This is because the role is like a mask operating as a shifter — it gets passed around, so to speak, and no one character is resolutely and unproblematically given one *or* the other role. Querelle may be the regular passive partner of Nono and Mario but, in his budding relationship with Gil, he takes on an active role which he cannot fulfil; Gil himself has 'masculine', 'active' feelings of amorous domination towards Roger, the spitting image of his sister, and the more conventional object-choice, Paulette. What this allows for, apart from some significant implications for some of the pairs to be discussed later, is the creation of a chain of relations in which *substitutability* is more important than the permanent inscription of one or the other identity, one or the other role. The chain is a *metonymic* chain, referring back (again) to a period before the 'transformation from a reading of the subject's relation to sexuality as contingent or metonymic, to a reading in which sexuality is reinterpreted as essential or metaphoric'.¹¹ Once again, we find a 'queer' origin of the fixed, normative sexual roles (concomitant to the social roles imposed upon constructions of masculinity and femininity) in the substitutability inherent in the very structure, and the very act of role-play. Jacques Lacan, in his reconfiguration of Freudian psychoanalysis, will often insist on the originary force of metonymical substitutability: 'la métonymie est là dès le début, et c'est ce qui rend possible la métaphore'.¹² Analogously, the sheer necessity of a clearly demarcated active/passive *difference within* the homosexual couple in the context of the sexual act is there before any later assumption of an *identity* through the role, and is what makes the identity and the role possible. For psychoanalysis, Freudian just as much as Lacanian, the polarity active/passive is

¹¹Edelman, *Homographesis*, p. 8.

¹²*Le Séminaire*. Livre III. *Les Psychoses*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris, Seuil, 1981), p. 259.

the originary enabling relation which yields sexual difference and the subsequent polarity masculine/feminine: 'Voilà donc où Freud entend asseoir les bases de l'amour. C'est seulement avec l'activité-passivité qu'entre en jeu ce qu'il en est proprement de la relation sexuelle.'¹³ However, for homosexuality, as Genet's novel shows, the polarity active/passive exists as the necessary structure of metonymic substitutability, apparently without resulting in the fixed, 'metaphoricized' assumption of identity that occurs with sexual difference.

The relationality implied in homosexual relations then is not fixed, although the necessity for a polar, hierarchical differentiation is. Is it possible that this violent differentiation is a projection of the internalized differentiation within the homosexual (non)subject, the self-division, what Nono is made aware of as his very own self gazing at him? Querelle himself forges another type of relationality when faced with Gil: 'C'était un petit Querelle, mais qui ne devait pas se développer, qui ne devait pas aller plus loin, en face de qui Querelle conservait un étrange sentiment de respect et de curiosité, comme s'il eût été en face du fœtus de Querelle enfant' (p. 204). The point here is twofold: firstly Querelle's relation is not with Gil, another man, but with his representation of Querelle himself as an embryo, a state of embryonic narcissism which 'should not be allowed to develop', perhaps because it should not develop into the full scale narcissism of his relation to his twin, or because it should not develop into the harsh differentiation of roles which governs his relations to Nono and Mario; secondly, that the respect, the *distancing* which Querelle must conserve could be taken to be a projection of the internal distancing of Querelle from himself, the distancing which makes him a self-divided, queer subject. This relation is one where absolute similarity and absolute differentiation are held in tension — it can hardly be said to represent any 'healthy' notion of intersubjectivity and relationality, but in it are inscribed the *origins*, the necessary preconditions (i.e. the tension between sameness and difference) which form any such notion.

Yet there is more. This moment in the novel comes shortly before Querelle attempts to take on the active role with Gil, and before he betrays him to the police. It explains, or at least sets the ground for, both. In effect Querelle betrays Gil *instead of* fucking him; he cannot take on the active role because that would imply that he let go of the aggressive passivity which makes him a traitor. Perhaps the single most disturbing aspect of Genet's destabilization of the norms of relationality (and this is noted by both White and Bersani), is the implicit connection made between passivity and betrayal. On a formal linguistic level, Genet plays

¹³ *Le Séminaire*. Livre XI. *Les Quatre Concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris, Seuil, 1973), p. 215.

with the idea by having Mario, the undisputed active macho male, be also, through his function as policeman, ‘une donneuse’, a traitor, and also a passive homosexual. This can easily be read as homophobic and quite reactionary, and with some justification, but another possibility opens when one considers how the passive role is thus portrayed by Genet, in an inversion typical of him, as the *powerful* one. Genet thus proves Leo Bersani’s contention that ‘to be penetrated is to abdicate power’ wrong;¹⁴ the penetrated have power, more than this, they have the ultimate power, the power to betray the very power structure that wants them powerless. While not wishing to exonerate betrayal from the odious ethical implications it normatively has, one has to take into account that, for Genet, as Bersani himself notes, ‘betrayal is an ethical necessity’.¹⁵ Genet’s characters are traitors, and their betrayal is, more often than not, linked to their sexual passivity — it is not that they somehow compensate for their loss of power by betraying; rather it is precisely the act of betrayal, analogous to the act of being penetrated, that bestows power. Again, it is tempting to see this from a broadly Lacanian perspective. For Lacan, homosexuality, as a perversion, is characterized by the structure of disavowal (*déni*); this disavowal in perversion forms the inverse side of the neurotic insistence on the question.¹⁶ What if it were possible to see this inverse structure of neurosis and perversion as implying that where the experience of neurosis is a disabling, stultifying (although, of course, extremely productive) uncertainty both about the subject and about the Other’s desire, the pervert’s disavowal is a structurally *enabling* certainty, endowing the ‘perverse subject’ with the capacity, at least, to disavow the patriarchal norm? If this could be entertained, then an analogy between the structure of perversion as disavowal in Lacan, and that of homosexual passivity as betrayal in Genet can surely also be imagined.¹⁷

The most important, and perhaps the most surprising outcome of Genet’s seemingly homophobic and reactionary association of homosexual passivity with betrayal is to be found if one examines the relation that betrayal, and the passivity it is always linked to, has with the formally

¹⁴‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’, p. 212.

¹⁵*Homos*, p. 151.

¹⁶See Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London, Routledge, 1996) pp. 138–40, entry on ‘perversion’, and in particular, p. 140: ‘While neurosis is characterised by a question, perversion is characterised by the lack of a question; the pervert does not doubt that his acts serve the *jouissance* of the Other.’ See also Lacan’s *Le Séminaire. Livre IV. La Relation d’objet*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris, Seuil 1994), pp. 199–214, where the relation between perversion and neurosis is sketched via the intermediary of the Oedipus complex.

¹⁷These remarks are made here as merely preliminary sketches of an altogether possible, if hitherto unattempted, and perhaps controversial, alignment of Lacan’s thought on perversion and sexual difference with the goals and interests of queer theory. Bersani’s own notion of the ‘gay outlaw’ in *Homos*, which counts Genet as one of its principal examples, although certainly psychoanalytically informed, stops short of making a strong claim about perversion as the central psychoanalytic notion in such an alignment.

political aspects of homosexuality. Now it is clear that the passive homosexual is no role model for any state; from the very beginnings of western political thought in Plato, homosexual passivity is ostracized from the polis, and one must agree with Bersani that 'the male citizen did the penetrating, which was the sexual manifestation of something I see no reason not to call the citizen-essence'.¹⁸ The penetrated, passive homosexual is precisely what does *not* constitute a citizen, for he refuses to enter into the arena of political power that penetration and citizenship both reciprocally entail. He is a traitor to the system of political power, but thus his power, as exemplified by Querelle, is the power to remain *outside* the polis, *outside* the system. This is what constitutes him as being evil.

Yet what kind of evil is this? For one, it is not evil connected with homosexuality as an avowed 'self-understanding'; Seblon, the Armenian, the self-confessed homosexuals are in effect incapable of evil, which lies at the heart of the passive macho male such as Querelle or, up to a point, Gil. Evil is the power of the passive homosexual, inasmuch as that passivity never takes on the guise of a self-discovery (it must be clear by now that Genet is certainly the wrong place to look for narratives of homosexual emancipation), and inasmuch as that power is the power which remains firmly *outside* the structures of power given in any social/political system. This evil has nothing to do with its being opposed to the 'good' of a normative, heterosexual relation to the polis; it has its origin and its location in the non-identity which constitutes the undifferentiated queer (non-)subject *before* the advent of subjectivity, relationality and politics, and is itself the origin of a power which is unrecognizable as such by the powers within the system, but which assails and destroys the system surreptitiously, by *betraying* it, by remaining firmly outside it. Bersani puts it in the following terms: 'evil, not as a crime against socially defined good, but as a turning away from the entire theatre of the good, a kind of meta-transgressive *dépassement* of the field of transgressive possibility itself.'¹⁹ Bersani is right about Genet's turning away from 'the entire theatre' of politics, but I would prefer to call this not a *dépassement* but, in a bizarre but important sense, a falling back, a *return* to the field of what may be called *originary lawlessness*. Just as Genet's queer (non-)subjects can only be located at a pre-subjective site of undifferentiated narcissism which is the very origin of subjectivity, just as the sexual relations of his characters are entangled in Genet's metonymic chain of substitutable sexual/social roles, the very substitutability of which is the origin of any fixed relation, so their evil is the evil which knows no law because it comes before the law as the violence, the betrayal which founds the law. This is not quite the Lacanian *non-du-père*;

¹⁸*Homos*, p. 105.

¹⁹*Homos*, p. 163.

rather it is that which is to be negated by the *non-du-père*, and which, in Genet's violent, vengeful, **pre-oedipal world**, snaps back and bites the hand that feeds it, betraying the macho father even *before* his interdiction.

This is how Genet successfully inscribes homosexuality at the very origin of identity, relationality and politics. However, is it right to talk about 'homosexuality', or indeed about 'origin', when we are faced with notions of both which are unrecognizable by what can, no doubt with some irony, be called 'common sense'? Genet's notion of homosexuality, **founded on the event of the act of anal sex rather than the self-understanding of a subject**, as well as his notion of origin as that which both founds and deconstructs what springs forth from it, as at the same time its condition of possibility *and* impossibility turn out to be, or perhaps rather fall back to being, notions that radically **disavow the logic of identity and of origins**. It is this disavowal which, beyond the knee-jerk, politically correct reaction to Genet's seemingly self-flagellating internalized homophobia, **should make it possible for him to be reclaimed as an exemplary queer writer.**

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