

Killian O' Dwyer

The Corps-à-corps of Queer Love

As a self-proclaimed addict of sex in philosophy, I often wonder about the place of queer love in relation to the Hegelian dialectic. Granted, this is no small task, given the fact that the modern definition of homosexuality as a “new species” of being only entered social consciousness more than half a century after the publication of *Phenomenology of Spirit and Philosophy of Right*¹. In addition, it is unclear how the so-called “unnatural” gesture afforded by queerness sits alongside Hegel’s particular brand of idealism, and the progressive work undertaken by sublation in reducing the internal differences between contradictory statements or ideas during the movement of back-and-forth rationalisation.² What is clear, however, is that Hegel also seemed to suffer from a form of sex addiction himself. An obsession with vindicating the formation of the family as the social arrangement in which the immediate substantiality of spirit is achieved, and where ‘one sex’, privileged by Hegel, emerges as ‘spirituality’ itself.³

1. In *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault credits Westphal for his instalment of the homosexual as a defined psychological, psychiatric and medical category, one in which the perception of same-sex desire shifted from sodomy to an inner androgynisation of the human soul. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 43.

2. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 134.

3. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 206.

For Hegel, sex is fundamentally an issue of rationality, one in which the manifestation of the seed or semen in nature becomes the phenomenal substance *par excellence* for the sublation of life itself.⁴ As he writes in *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, ‘spirit’ (the rational awareness or self-conscious certainty of one’s own being in reality) is comparable with the activity of the seed (samen; “seed”, “semen”, “grain”, “togetherness”), ‘for with this the plant begins, yet it is also the result of the plant’s entire life.’⁵ Man’s ability to relate to himself, as a form of internal mediation, is similar to the generative work of the seed, since it develops only in order to produce itself again as another kernel of self-relation.⁶ Man conceives *himself* by producing a son, a living being that allows him to relate to himself as his own resource.⁷ This relationship of father and son, glued together by the substantive feeling of familial love, enables man to ‘know himself’ implicitly through his self-conscious unity with another and of the other with him.⁸ Spirit, therefore, is the *filiation* between father and son,

4. As highlighted by Derrida in the most recent retranslation of *Glas*. Jacques Derrida, *Clang*, trans. David Wills and Geoffrey Bennington (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 35.

5. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 253; Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. John Sibree (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1914), 82.

6. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, 50.

7. Ibid.

8. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 199.

the expression of rational 'love' that binds the family structure together and which concretises his position as its head.⁹ There is no deviation from this according to Hegel, no queer divergence from the family unit or its understanding of love as the substantive feeling which unites members together under the auspice of one spiritually endowed sex which privileges male power, authority and sexuality.¹⁰ Queer love, it seems, has no possible place in Hegelian thinking.

In Luca Guadagnino's *Queer* (2024), however, resides a love story that departs from Hegel's idealised notion of filiation, one that engages with the formidable work of sublation and its attempt to rationalise sex as such, in subtle yet deeply compelling ways. Set in 1950's Mexico City, *Queer* is a poetic exploration of love, obsession, sex, (and yes) drugs shared between a downcast American expatriate Lee (Daniel Craig) and a much younger Eugene (Drew Starkey). Meeting eyes with one another for the first time over a cockfight, Lee immediately becomes infatuated with the suave, poised figure of this boyish character, whose overtly blasé demeanour imparts a profound sense of mystery or inscrutability, about who he is, what he is thinking, or even who or what he desires. After manufacturing several encounters at the local café and bar, Lee eventually befriends the enigmatic Eugene, before later establishing a relationship as lovers. However, Eugene's impenetrable façade, emphasised by the indifferent gaze that flashes from behind gold framed spectacles, soon causes the heroin-addicted Lee to unravel as he struggles to read his young counterpart's emotions. In fact, the visually Edward Hopper-esque cinematography, in which candied-coloured interiors and skylines are offset by the cool shadows cast by pale moonlight, only adds to the general atmosphere of isolation in the film, and the subsequent distance that seems to grow between Lee and Eugene, despite the increasing time spent with one another during their unlikely companionship.

If one were to apply a Hegelian lens to this queer love story, it is clear that this particular relationship struck up between both men is not

the same filiation expected of father and son (think gay fantasy, not the literal paternal bond of blood relations *per se*). Lee's frequent doubts about Eugene's sexual orientation, given his successive evenings spent presumably dating a woman, highlights the tenuous nature of their precarious arrangement, in which the substantive feeling of love reads as distinctly one-sided. As Jacques Derrida notes in *Glas* (his most "direct" engagement with the motif of the family in *Philosophy of Right*), love in the Hegelian dialectic acts as the immutable substance which allows man to overcome egoistic individuality and act universally according to the human will, with a reverence for the laws and truth of the world.¹¹ While nature itself lacks a rational order that can sustain the synthesis of the human spirit, the loving family provides the instance for self-conscious certainty in which all individual members can achieve objectivity, truth and an ethical life through the back-and-forth rationalisation of their familial bond.¹²

For Hegel, the dialectical movement of contradictory ideas, which eventually sublates into a synthesized concept, indicates that there is already an innate *familiarity* or *filiation* shared between opposing positions in the moment prior to apperception. 'What is familiar and well known,'¹³ Hegel writes in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 'as such is not really known [cognized] for the very reason that it is *familiar* and *well known*.' While sublation, as a process which cancels, negates but also preserves an element of the antithetical argument in the final concept, is a unity of ideas that arguably incorporates differences which are 'unfamiliar' to the workings of conscious mind, Hegel asserts that the immediacy of representation (the ability to cognise something *as such*) suggests that there is in fact some

9. Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey and Richard Rand (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 31.

10. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 199.

11. Derrida, *Glas*, 12; Allen W. Wood, Introduction to *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), xii.

12. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline: Part I: Science of Logic* trans. Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 55; 66; Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 276.

13. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 20.

‘unmoved indifference in existence itself.’¹⁴ In other words, what might appear to be queerly distinct is in fact always somewhat ‘familiar’ to the workings of rational thought, as the underlying structure which enables man to know himself’ implicitly through his self-conscious unity with another (his son).¹⁵ However, it is clear that Lee does not ‘know’ Eugene, or perhaps even himself, as such. Whatever filiation is shared between them at times appears to be disjointed, frigid, and transactional; and while there are genuine moments of tenderness and intense passion, these scenes are always bookended by Eugene’s profound unfathomability, his distinct elusiveness when confronted with Lee’s persistent probing.

Eugene’s emotional distance, his seeming refusal to revel in Lee’s affections, precipitates an obsessional decline for the latter into drugs, sex and frustration at the unknowability of the conscious mind. Bereft at not ‘knowing’ his lover, Lee travels with the reluctant Eugene to South America in the hopes of finding *yagé*, a plant that promises to grant a willing recipient with the gift of telepathy. There, they find the fierce character of *yagé*-expert Dr. Cotter, who brews a psychedelic ayahuasca for both men from samples collected in the forest. What ensues in the following scene provides the audience with a curious engagement of the Hegelian dialectic, one which complicates the divide between queerness, filiation and self-conscious certainty.

Following a bizarre sequence in which both men appear to vomit up their hearts (or are they gonads?) after drinking the ayahuasca, both Eugene and Lee join Dr. Cooper by the campfire at the edge of the forest. Staring into the flames that lick the logs of wood, their bodies slowly begin to fade into nothing, dwindling away as Lee finally telepathically “hears” Eugene’s truth for the first time: “I’m not queer, I’m disembodied.” The gentle response “I know” that escapes his lover’s mouth is succeeded by a scene in which both men, visible again, engage in a highly performative dance that is balanced between visual displays of longing and/or mourning. Naked, they embrace, twist, rub and pull at one another, before each begins to penetrate the other. This is not sex, but a vivid blending of bodies into one flesh, in which each delve below the other’s skin. Arms and legs

move beneath the surface of a shared membrane as they continue to explore, tease and wrestle with one another. Lee’s forehead becomes Eugene’s chest, whose fingers become part of the other’s shoulder blade. Skin stretches, melts and fuses. Together, both men merge in the act of shaping the other’s body, pouring over one another in what can only be described as a powerful erotics of translation, a *corps-à-corps* in which the once inscrutable mind of the young Eugene (text) is finally revealed to Lee (reader) as such.

Corps-à-corps, from the literal French “body-to-body”, is a phrase used when describing “a dual,” “hand-to-hand combat,” “wrestling,” or the act of two fencers coming into physical contact with one another. However, it is also suggestive of “intercourse,” “love-making,” or “a sexual embrace” shared between bodies, a grappling or tussling performed with one another during an erotic encounter.¹⁶ In an interview with Richard Kearney, Derrida remarks curiously that ‘in every reading, there is a *corps-à-corps* between reader and text,’ an intimate struggle or squeeze in the moment when writing engages with the immediacy of the analytical mind.¹⁷ *Corps-à-corps*, for Derrida, is an expression that gestures to the readerly intimacy or relationality which exists at the heart of translation itself, as an operation that is always mediated by the threat of violent interruption of textual bodies, the conceivable loss of meaning or context that accompanies any act of interpretation between reader and text.¹⁸

As Lenka Vrábliková and Thomas Clément Mercier note in their double special edition of *Parallax*, which wrestles with Derrida’s notion of *corps-à-corps* in two parts, the relational aspect

14. Ibid, 19.

15. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 199.

16. Lenka Vrábliková and Thomas Clément Mercier, “Corps à: body/ies in deconstruction,” *Parallax* 25, No. 1 (Spring 2019): 1. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2019.1570600>

17. Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage: Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Herbert Marcuse, Stanislas Breton, Jacques Derrida* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 126.

18. Lenka Vrábliková and Thomas Clément Mercier, “À corps: the corpus of deconstruction,” *Parallax* 25, No. 2 (Summer 2019): 112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2019.1607228>

of this expression testifies to the structural necessity of translating the individual bodily experience beyond said singularity, a desire for exposition and transmission that loses the notion of the singular body in the moment of translation.¹⁹ Put differently, while Hegel's dialectic of the loving family represents a social formation that continually unfolds internal differences until a purer, universality (one spiritual sex) emerges, Derrida's intimate *corps-à-corps* is an expression that acknowledges the interruption or 'betrayal' of disparate meanings which makes translation possible, a togetherness that remains queerly marked by division.²⁰ In this sense, *corps-à-corps* equally represents the impossibility of ever truly synthesising opposing arguments as such, since the ongoing struggle or sexual embrace between reader and text, fuelled by the obsessional desire to translate what necessarily remains untranslatable, is an activity predicated on the loss of 'bodies' or textual meanings during the very act of transmission itself.²¹

This dual *corps-à-corps*, the grappling or tussling of bodies in translation which circumvents the finality of a "winning" argument or position, is gleaned towards the end of *Queer* following the peculiar wrestling/embracing of skin shared between two queerly marked lovers. Having returned to their sleeping quarters after this out-of-body experience, Lee visibly seeks affection from Eugene, only to be rebuffed with his customary aloofness. Despite their telepathic connection and subsequent merging of corporeal flesh, there is still an irrevocable distance that exists between both men, to which no drug can ever truly bridge as such. When dawn comes, Eugene and Lee set out into the forest on their journey home, but before too long, the figure of the young lover disappears in the moment that Lee turns away briefly. This is not the same fading of bodies witnessed the previous evening around the campfire, when both men erotically tussle together in a poetic display of translation and transmission between discrete beings. Instead, it is a sudden and irreparable vanishing, an evaporation that does not signal the synthesis of opposing ideas or figures into one spiritual sex or identity, but instead gestures to 'what remains' anterior and exterior to sublation – the queer differences that 'fall away' as the

19. Ibid.

20. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 81; 115.

21. Vrábliková and Mercier, "À corps": 112.

remainders or excrement of Hegel's philosophical essentiality.²²

While Derrida recognises that Hegel's dialectical method is predicated on the fact that it can anticipate and incorporate the very notion of a possible counterargument in advance of it being posed, the *corps-à-corps* that inevitably plays out between disparate bodies of meaning evidences how the translation of ideas is always a slippery and elusive affair. In *Queer*, both men are textual strangers to one another, constantly and dynamically interacting, contradicting, and confusing each other in unexpected and unpredictably loving ways. Queer love in this film is not the substantive feeling or filiation that allows man to know himself as such, rather, it is the transmission of discrete positions that is predicated on the inevitable collision of meaning which threatens to disorientate or dislocate the logical progression of the rational mind. Lee's obsession, and ultimate failure, with truly "knowing" Eugene as such, illustrates that difference never becomes a property of the final concept via sublation in the strictest sense of the word. There is, and always will be, a *corps-à-corps* between text and reader, a sexual wrestling of individual entities that resists becoming synthesised as such, the queer occurrences which scholars and lovers obsess over, the differences that remain outside of any form of dialectical calculation.²³ There is no place for queer love in Hegelianism, only the potential for queer things to interrupt or derail the accumulative progression of absolute knowledge itself, exposing it to the risk of being torn to pieces during the act of translation, just like the concepts or ideas we obsessively wrestle with (sexually) but which forever elude the totality of rationalisation as such.

Works Cited

Derrida, Jacques. *Clang*. Translated by David Wills and Geoffrey Bennington. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2021.

Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*. Translated

22. Derrida, "Outwork," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 9.

23. Jeffrey Bennington and David Wills, Translator's Preface to *Clang*, by Jacques Derrida (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), xii.

- by Barbara Johnson. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Glas*. Translated by John P. Leavey and Richard Rand. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality* Volume I: An Introduction. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Edited by Allen W. Wood. Translated by H.B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline: Part I: Science of Logic*. Translated by Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel O. Dahlstrom. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. Translated by John Sibree. London: G. Bell and Sons, 1914.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by Terry Pinkard. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Kearney, Richard. *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage: Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Herbert Marcuse, Stanislas Breton, Jacques Derrida*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.
- Vrábliková, Lenka and Thomas Clément Mercier. "À corps: the corpus of deconstruction," *Parallax* 25, No. 2 (Summer 2019): 111-118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2019.1607228>
- Vrábliková, Lenka and Thomas Clément Mercier. "Corps à: body/ies in deconstruction." *Parallax* 25, No. 1 (Spring 2019): 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2019.1570600>