

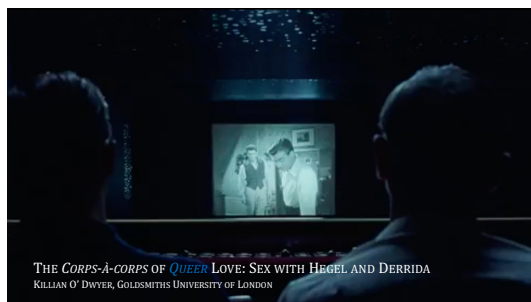
THE *CORPS-À-CORPS* OF *QUEER* LOVE: SEX WITH HEGEL AND DERRIDA

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Moderator: Jack Pocaluyko



Corps-à-corps, Hegel before Derrida. Derrida after Hegel. Hegel in Derrida, Derrida on Hegel. From the pages of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, *Philosophy of Right*, *Glas*, now *Clang* and *Margins of Philosophy*, I find figures that spoon questions of sex and love, figures that embrace, envelop, and

suspend one another, figures that approach one another from behind and from a position of frustration, figures that attempt to correct and circumvent each other in a general act of cultivation, figures that sublate and supplant economies of difference, and figures that eventually wrestle with one another during one of the most intimate crosspoints between sex and dialectics, the act of translation itself. Between Hegel and Derrida, I find bodies that grapple with the ways in which sex, or indeed sexes, are read, felt and loved in art, philosophy and literature, a perverse struggle of numerous erotic potentials which I savour as a sustained intellectual commitment across various strands of my own research.



Corps-à-corps, this paper is an attempt to loosen how sex becomes idealised by the formidable edifice of Hegelianism and the procedural work of sublation as a process of cancellation, preservation and elevation all at once, a form of logic that aims to reduce all inherent differences which arise

between discrete entities during the pendulous movement of back-and-forth rationalisation. In fact, the loosening of Hegel and his spirit in this paper takes place via Derrida and *différance*, with D. and deconstruction coming after H. and Hegelianism, from behind, *al tergo*, in order to demonstrate how the former actually comes *before* the latter, deconstruction *before* idealism, and Hegel *after* Derrida. In short, this paper is about how Derrida the writer seems to spoon

Hegel the philosopher at various moments across his work, *corp-à-corps* or body-to-body, D. cupping the idealised form of sex, love and life as they manifest within H himself.



Ladling Derrida and deconstruction onto Hegel and idealism, my ambition in this moment is to consider what remains anterior and exterior to Hegel's rationalisation of sex, to consider the queer differences that 'fall away' as remainders or excrement of his philosophical essentiality when

placed into constellation with Derrida, and to the arrival of a possible outcome we can all share, in which the category of sex cannot continue as something that can be rationalised "as such" and "as is." Instead, sex, I propose, is always invoked as an erotic outpouring of perverse sexes, a deconstructive *corp-à-corps* that reworks the notion of a discrete 'body' (sexual, textual, conceptual) and its insides, by placing it under scrutiny, between quotation marks, 'until it is distended, diverted, out of joint,' before resetting it 'member by member, word by word' into the most 'diverse reconfigurations.'¹ Without doubt, the sentiment I cultivate herein is borne out of Derrida's uncompromising challenge to the dialectic arrangement of the Hegelian family in *Glas*, the dorsal turn of man in David Wills's "Spoonful" and the sexual poetics of Luca Guadagnino's *Queer*, in which the tender motif of lovers spooning, the cradling of the one in front by the embrace of the other from behind, provides visual saliency to what I perceive as deconstruction's erotic inversion of sublation itself, through the promise of what Anne Berger sees in Derrida's writing as the coming of 'another sexual relation' unencumbered by logics of opposition, a sexual condition of life that *remains in advance* of the Hegelian dialectic itself.² What follows here and now is a queer playing of the spoons.



As a self-proclaimed addict of sex in philosophy, I often wonder about the place, or lack thereof, of queer love in relation to Hegelianism, in which the feeling of so-called "normative love" enables man to not only know themselves individually as a being

¹ Jacques Derrida, "Living On" in *Parages*, ed. John P. Leavey, trans. James Hulbert (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 104.

² Anne Emmanuelle Berger, "Voice and Sexuality" in *Erotics of Deconstruction: Auto-Affection After Derrida*, ed. Lynn Turner (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024), 193.

that is in and for itself, but also as member of a social formation that invokes the immediate substantiality of spirit, which for Hegel is the unity of the family.³ Granted, it is no small task to consider what Hegel might say on queer love, or what queer love might do to Hegel, given that, as Foucault points out in *History of Sexuality*, the arrival of the modern definition of homosexual man as a new species of being only enters public consciousness more than half a century after the publication of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* in 1820.⁴ What is clear, however, is that Hegel reads as someone who equally lives with an indirect form of sex addiction himself, a more pernicious obsession to vindicate the formation of the family unit as a social arrangement in which 'one sex emerges' in his work 'as spirituality itself.'⁵



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. 'Spirit', Hegel writes in *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, as the rational awareness or self-conscious certainty of one's own being in reality, is comparable with the activity of the simple seed or *samen*, the Latin for "seed", "semen", "grain" or "togetherness", from which 'the plant begins, yet [the social formation of the family, to use Hegel's logic] is also the result of the plant's entire life.'⁶ Man's ability to relate to himself as a self-conscious individual is similar to the generative work of the seed for Hegel, since it develops only in order to produce itself again as another kernel of self-relation in the world. The one sex of spirituality in Hegelianism lies with the relationship between the father and the seed, the seed that ironically performs its own kind of spooning action, in the sense that it is issued from the father in order to turn in on itself, to return to itself as a self-relation of one to the other. Man conceives himself by producing a son, a living being that allows him to relate to himself as his own resource

³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Stephen Houlgate, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 162.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 43.

⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 206.

⁶ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 50.

through the social glue of familial love, enabling man to ‘know himself’ implicitly through his self-conscious unity with another and of the other with him.⁷



As Derrida eloquently unravels as part of his infamous critique of Hegel in *Glas*, spirit is the *filiation* between father and son, the expression of rational ‘love’ that binds the family structure together and which concretises his position as its head. To quote Derrida: ‘the spirit is neither the

father nor the son, but filiation, the relation of father to son, of son to father, of father to father through the mediation of the son, of son to son through the mediation of the father. The spirit is the element of *Aufhebung* in which the seed returns to the father.’⁸ There is no deviation from this filial arrangement for 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 that privileges male power, authority and sexuality. Within Hegel’s family, it seems that there is only ever a frontal engagement between father and son, a mutual recognition based on their shared position with one another and within the family. Queer love or any other kind of relation which deviates from this frontality, it seems, has no possible place as such in Hegelian thought.



Yet deconstruction, as Derrida suggests during an interview printed in *Positions*, marks ‘the limit, the interruption, the destruction of the Hegelian *relève* wherever it operates,’ the lifting up or erection of the familial seed or sperm as it manifests in thought, language and life in general. *Corps-à-corps*,

deconstruction works to suspend the ‘movement of idealisation’ and the spermatic virility of ‘logocentrism’, the pervasive and idealised kind of metaphysical thinking that presupposes an originary link between the presence of the word of God, the experience of the living present and the power associated with male sexuality.⁹ In other words, what deconstruction invokes for

⁷ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 199.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey and Richard Rand (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 31.

⁹ Derrida, “Positions,” 45-46.

Derrida is the reversal of the *autoinsemination* of sublation and the Hegelian dialectic, the ‘voice of being’ that presences ‘the living present’ through the systemization and comprehension of the spoken word, and the suspension of an idealism that presents life or reality “as such” and “as is.” For translators of Derrida like David Wills, deconstruction also marks an undecidable eroticism concerning what distinguishes sex from love or intimacy in reality, what sex *is* and what sex *this* is, and *who* or *what* is doing it. More profound still, deconstruction, according to Wills, involves a certain dorsality, an inversion of frontality or the ability to perform a frontal address, a dorsal turn of what we presume to be naturally human or what it means to be involved in a face-to-face encounter.¹⁰ For Wills, deconstruction implicates the human subject ‘in the back’ so to speak, in the sense that it, deconstruction, seizes upon the bipedal upright stance of mankind, and the spinal column that supposedly frees the human hands from basal manoeuvring for the manipulation of tools. While we might traditionally associate the category of the human as something which is distinctly frontal in nature, given the primacy attributed to the human hands, the face, and the directionality of speech, deconstruction gestures to how humanness resides *behind* as well as *before* the human itself, *behind* the originary technology of the human as vertical erect man and *before* what remains external to the frontal visual perspective of the knowable. The dorsal, Wills writes, cannot be *foreseen*, it is a function of surprise, the implication of exposure to vulnerability and the acknowledgment that one’s sexuality is decidedly technological, prosthetic and ‘from behind’.¹¹



This invocation of dorsality by deconstruction, for Wills, provides a compelling reconfiguration *of* recognition as a face-to-back encounter, a spooning sexuality that confronts or rearends assumptions associated with nudity, passivity, and vulnerability, and the potential to foster a new ethics of sexual sensitivity in which one spooner is “filled” by the unseen other from behind, both resorting or regressing delicately into a mysterious animality and the scent or nuzzle of a lover’s shoulder or neck. In Derrida’s *The Post Card*, Will’s locates this very sentiment midway through “Envois,” a poignant verse that reads as if it were lifted from the script of Guadagnino’s *Queer*: Derrida writes: ‘and after the telephone call, I will turn my back

¹⁰ David Wills, “Spoonful: The Dorsal Deconstruction of Eroticism” in *Erotics of Deconstruction: Auto-Affection After Derrida*, ed. Lynn Turner (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 2024), 41.

¹¹ Ibid, 41-42.

to you to sleep, as usual, and you will paste yourself against me, giving me your hand, you will envelop me.’¹² What excites Wills in this sentence from *The Post Card* is the fact that Derrida seems to gesture to the pre-coital phone call and the post-coital spooning of lovers independent of the sexual act itself, the likely in-betweenness or space of an encounter that is *in* touch with sex yet also *before* sex in the finite use of the word, the inversion of sex as something which is considered to be immediate and frontal, instead manifesting as something which is necessarily caught up in delay and deferral, in the arms of an unseen other who whispers sweet nothings to us from behind.¹³



Spooning, and the idealism it frustrates, is an erotic tension I notice in Guadagnino's *Queer*, the wrestling and/or embracing of figures engaged in what would appear from the outside as a homoerotic father-son relation, but a relationship which is ultimately

derailed by “the father’s” inability to recognise or read his “son” or “seed” as such. 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, played by Daniel Craig and a youthful intelligence officer Eugene, played by Drew Starkey. Meeting eyes with one another for the first time over a cockfight, Lee instantly 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 as such. While a sexual relationship eventually develops between the two after several manufactured encounters at the local café and bar, Eugene’s impenetrable façade, emphasised by the indifferent gaze that flashes from behind gold framed spectacles, soon drives the heroin-addicted Lee to unravel, as he struggles to ‘know’ Eugene for who he *is*, or perhaps even *he* 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.

¹² Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 111.

¹³ Will, “Spoonful”, 47.

In fact, the narrative that surrounds Lee's frequent doubts about Eugene's sexual orientation, given the latter successive evenings spent presumably dating a woman, highlights not only the tenuous nature of their precarious arrangement, in which the substantive feeling of love reads as distinctly one-sided, but also *Queer*'s refusal to arrive at what I would notionally think of as a distinctly Hegelian resolution. Bereft by his inability to "know" the truth behind his lover's or son's sexual orientation, Lee travels with the reluctant Eugene to South America in the hopes of finding *yagé*, a plant that promises to grant any willing recipient with the gift of telepathy, or the capacity to simultaneously relate to another and with oneself. There, in the jungle of South America, they find and consume this prized psychedelic root, thus initiating, in the most visually obvious address to the process of sublation, a mesmeric dance, a *corps-à-corps* or relational encounter balanced between longing and mourning, sex and aggression, combat and comingling. Naked, they curl, twist, rub and pull at one another, blending into one flesh, delving below the skin of the other in a form of embrace that escapes all logical sense. In fluid motion, arms and legs move beneath the surface of a shared membrane as they continue to explore, tease and wrestle with one another in the throes of a profound eroticism. 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 "body-to-body", is a phrase used in French to describe "a dual" or "hand-to-hand combat," a form of physical "wrestling" or the act of two fencers coming into contact with one another. *Corps-à-corps* equally also suggests a kind of "intercourse," "love-making," or "sexual embrace" shared between bodies, a grappling or tussling shared from one body to the next in the throes of an erotic encounter.¹⁴ *Corps-à-corps*, for Derrida, is simultaneously an expression that gestures to the intimacy or relationality which resides at the heart of translation itself, an operation that is always mediated by the threat of dissolution, to the conceivable loss of meaning or context that accompanies any act of interpretation.¹⁵ 'In every reading,' Derrida remarks during an interview with Richard Kearney, 'there is a *corps-à-corps* between reader and text,' a curiously intimate struggle or squeeze of positions that

¹⁴ 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>

¹⁵ 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>

manifest in the moment of writing only to threaten the security of the analytical mind, to derail the progression of knowledge itself with the violence of an irreducible interruption or self-rupture. The expression *corps-à-corps* 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.¹⁶ Put differently, while Hegel's dialectic of the loving family represents a social formation that continually unfolds internal differences until a purer, universality 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.¹⁷



This *corps-à-corps*, I would suggest, is gleaned towards the end of this peculiar sequence in *Queer*, when returning to intimacy of the bedroom, Lee visibly seeks affection from Eugene, only to be rebuffed by his customary aloofness. Despite their telepathic connection and subsequent merging of

corporeal flesh, the most literal nod to sublation as a Hegelian process in which unity must prevail, there is still an irrevocable distance that exists between both men, to which no plant or seed can ever truly sew 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, turns his back so to speak. This is not the same fading of bodies witnessed the previous evening, 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 the notion of 'what remains' anterior and exterior to sublation



itself – the queer differences that cannot be foreseen or interceded, but approach us stealthily, from behind, *al tergo*.¹⁸

Spooning, as the final scene of *Queer* illustrates, is the abyss shared between lover and other, the back-

¹⁶ Vrábliková and Clément Mercier, "*À corps*", 112.

¹⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 81; 115.

¹⁸ Derrida, "Outwork," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 9.

to-front engagement of detour and diversion, of making oneself vulnerable to what comes to us from behind. No matter how snug spooners may be, however much one touches the other or takes the other inside oneself, spooning invokes an unforeseeable form of communication that moves across the space of the other to the lover without prior recognition.¹⁹ It is the anterior and exterior to idealist thinking, in the sense that spooning cannot be apprehended *in advance* of thought, but is always located *in the back* of human intelligibility and vision as such. If dorsality, as previously mentioned, implies that humanness is always located ‘in the back’ of oneself as a prosthetic unknowability, then difference is not something that can be simply sublated or synthesised, nor does it exclusively enter into the back-and-forth rationalisation of dialectics. Rather, difference spoons the self-conscious individual as both something which is unforeseeable but equally loving, another kind of sexual relation that may be pre-, mid- or post-coital, but one that exposes the thinking subject to a queer sense of non-recognition, non-meaning or non-resolution, an encounter or experience that ultimately threatens the totalising effect of sublation itself. Spooning is a relation that is never simply about the self, but about the other after the self, pressing up against the self, so that I might wish that my otherness might come before myself, if only to engage with it differently.

¹⁹ Wills, “Spoonful”, 41.