

D. J. Baker

## Queer Writing/Writing Queer: Elizabeth Stephens' *Queer Writing: Homoeroticism in Jean Genet's Fiction*

*The one cannot exist without the other. Which is the sun and which is the shadow?*

— Jean Genet

Jean Genet is a controversial figure. He is at once lauded for his darkly original and overtly erotic literary vision and denounced, by heterosexual and homosexual literary critics alike, for perpetuating homophobic discourses about male same-sex desire as pederastic, aggressive, opportunistic and sadomasochistic. Despite these criticisms, Genet's fiction continues to be popular among queer readers and is the ongoing focus of scholarly research.

Given this, Elizabeth Stephens' text *Queer Writing: Homoeroticism in Jean Genet's Fiction* (2009) presents a timely and necessary critical reassessment of the dominant view of Genet in scholarly circles. Stephens provides this reassessment whilst

simultaneously demonstrating that Genet's fiction provides a new (queer) way of approaching the study of writing practice itself.

At the outset, Stephens steps away from the 'psychobiographical' leaning in Genet criticism—epitomized in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*—which regards Genet's writing as a literal or autobiographical representation of his own sexual subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> The psychobiographical approach tends to use Genet's literary work to denounce or (rarely) to celebrate its author's sexual and criminal history.<sup>2</sup> This kind of Genet criticism refers heavily to Genet's biography and presents him as, depending on perspective, a sexual radical or sexual criminal.

Stephens argues that Genet's fiction depends not on the inscription of a stable sexual subjectivity but on the deployment (or mobilization) of a 'perverse dynamic' within the written text itself. In other words, the homoerotic content of Genet's fiction can be seen as a discursive perversity mobilized within the text to disrupt heteronormativity rather than as the (autobiographical) reflection of the author's sexuality or identity/subjectivity.<sup>3</sup>

The deployment of this perverse dynamic can be seen to be a writerly technique used to subvert dominant discourses around sexuality and to address the long standing problem of the heteronormative inflection of language and, therefore, how to inscribe 'a sexual and corporeal specificity that is understood as inherently fluid and transformative'.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Stephens argues that Genet's novels provide 'one of the most detailed accounts of the difficulties of writing homoerotically within a

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<sup>1</sup> Amin, K. 2010, 'Queer Writing: Homoeroticism in Jean Genet's Fiction', *French Studies*, Volume 64, Issue 4, pp. 507-508.

<sup>2</sup> Amin, 507.

<sup>3</sup> Stephens, E. *Queer Writing: Homoeroticism in Jean Genet's Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Stephens, 158.

language that is itself inherently heteronormative'.<sup>5</sup> Stephens deftly demonstrates throughout *Queer Writing* that Genet's narratives frame themselves as a disruptive homosexual insertion into a (heteronormative) language constructed to exclude the homosexual other. It is appropriate therefore that Stephens uses Genet's work to theorize a way to inscribe sexual difference without investing in the notion of stable sexual identities or categories as the "source" of narratives featuring sexual otherness.

Stephens draws out the connections and confluences between Genet's 'textual strategies of camp mimicry and literary corruption'<sup>6</sup> and the textual strategies of Hélène Cixous. This is in itself significant. Queer Theory has been reluctant to engage with feminist poststructuralists such as Cixous, seeing the work of Cixous and others as somehow essentialist. This is despite the fact that Queer Theory has its origins in Poststructuralism<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, Queer Theory employs a number of key concepts from Poststructuralism: the unstable, fragmented and de-centered identity of Lacanian psychoanalysis; Jacques Derrida's 'deconstruction of binary conceptual and linguistic structures'; and 'Foucault's model of discourse, knowledge and power'.<sup>8</sup> It is refreshing to see a Queer Theorist not only acknowledge this genealogy but engage with it productively.

Stephens, in accord with Judith Butler and others,<sup>9</sup> rejects the notion that Cixous is a sexual essentialist and demonstrates how, like Genet, Cixous sought 'to resignify a negatively constructed marginality and to inscribe its corporeal and erotic specificity

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<sup>5</sup> Stephens, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Stephens, 5.

<sup>7</sup> See Spargo, T. *Foucault and Queer Theory* (Cambridge, U.K.: Icon Books, 1999) & Jagose, A. *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Spargo, 41

<sup>9</sup> Stephens, 23.

in language'.<sup>10</sup> Cixous' theorization of how this re-signification of language might be achieved is core to Stephens' framing of Genet's writing practice. By comparing and contrasting Genet's writing practice and the textual strategies of Cixous, Stephens proposes that Genet's writing be seen as *Écriture Homosexuelle*, a form of writing that inscribes the erotic and corporeal specificity of a queer subjectivity.<sup>11</sup>

A brief discussion of Cixous' writing strategies is needed to give a sense of what Stephens intends by defining Genet's work as *Écriture Homosexuelle*. Building on Derrida's notion of *differànce*, Hélène Cixous—in her landmark essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975)—argued for a writing strategy that turns away from texts that reproduce, disseminate and reinforce uneven power relations between men and women and heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals. Cixous argued against 'writing as dissemination'—or writing as heteronormative proscriptive discourse—that, she contended, typified much literature produced in 'phallogocentric culture'.<sup>12</sup> Cixous advocated instead a kind of writing that she described as *écriture féminine*. Put simply, *écriture féminine* is a discourse—or form of writing—that is not limited to a set, and often binary, number of terms/norms but rather a discourse which accommodates ambiguous terms.<sup>13</sup> This form of writing entails the inscription of (feminine) difference in both language and text.<sup>14</sup> Cixous postulates this sort of

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<sup>10</sup> Amin, 508.

<sup>11</sup> Drawing on Cixous' theory, I coined the phrase "*Écriture Queer*" in 2008 in a paper delivered at the *Derrida Today International Conference* (Sydney, 10-12<sup>th</sup> July) and in a paper published in 2010 (see note 19). I became aware of Stephens' coining of the term "*écriture homosexuelle*", also drawing on Cixous' theory, in 2010. Although the two terms have a similar genealogy, my term "*écriture queer*" brings together the theories of Julia Kristeva and Cixous and focuses on the abject aspect of the term "queer," which has connotations of the strange, monstrous or uncanny. Stephens has developed the notion of *écriture homosexuelle* beyond my own development of *Écriture Queer* which is, as yet, in a nascent stage.

<sup>12</sup> Moi, T. *Sexual Textual Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1985), 100.

<sup>13</sup> Moi, 106.

<sup>14</sup> Showalter, E. 1981, 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Writing and Sexual Difference, pp. 179-205. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343159>

writing as 'Other bisexual' or 'feminine' and sets it up in opposition to traditional (heterosexual male) discourses.<sup>15</sup> As Toril Moi describes:

For Cixous, feminine texts are texts that 'work on the difference'... strive in the direction of difference, struggle to undermine the dominant phallogocentric logic, split open the closure of the binary opposition and revel in the pleasures of open-ended textuality.<sup>16</sup>

Cixous defines much writing as trapped in *patriarchal binary thought*<sup>17</sup> and, in the vein of Derrida, argues that *terms* (which refer to norms), such as 'man', only acquire meaning in relationship to other terms/norms, such as 'woman', or in the absence of other terms/norms.<sup>18</sup> Within this system 'the terms or norms that are more closely related to the heterocentric term/norm 'man' subordinate all others'.<sup>19</sup> Cixous further argues that for one term to acquire meaning it must destroy the other.<sup>20</sup> The other term, more simply 'the other', must be destroyed for the dominant system to come into meaning, to find purpose, to have a sense of itself and its boundaries. Put more directly, Cixous 'sets multiple, heterogeneous *differànce*' against 'any binary scheme of thought'.<sup>21</sup> *Écriture féminine* then, is a style of writing that foregrounds plurality, openness and gender difference with regards terms/norms or categories and also with regards subjectivities (or reading and writing positions).

Genet, however, framed his inscription of corporeal and erotic specificity as "perversity", not as "other bisexual" or "feminine writing". Although Cixous and Genet

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<sup>15</sup> Moi, 107.

<sup>16</sup> Moi, 106.

<sup>17</sup> Moi, 104.

<sup>18</sup> Moi, 106.

<sup>19</sup> Baker, D.J. 2010a. 'Monstrous Fairytales: Towards an *Écriture* Queer', *Colloquy: Text, Theory, Critique*, 20, 79-103. See page 91. [www.colloquy.monash.edu.au/issue20/baker.pdf](http://www.colloquy.monash.edu.au/issue20/baker.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Moi, 103.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

share a similar deconstructive and radical intent, the strategies they adopt differ. Stephens notes these differences whilst also positing that 'femininity is for Cixous as perversion is for Genet, and as I am arguing of queer, itself understood as a mode of writing.'<sup>22</sup> This could be read as a rather too neat conflation of the terms femininity/perversity/queer if Stephens had not already gone to pains to describe the openness and ambiguity of the terms as used by Cixous and Genet themselves. Given the "built-in" ambiguity of these terms it is perhaps more fruitful to see Stephens' statement as indicating not a slippage of terms but a radical (and queer) cross-contamination between terms and norms. This is a cross-contamination which mirrors the constitutive cross-contamination of all terms/norms set in opposition (man/woman, hetero/queer etc.) described by Judith Butler as 'the logic of repudiation'.<sup>23</sup>

Although the similarities between Cixous' and Genet's textual strategies are clear, Genet's "perversity" can more confidently be described as "proto-queer" in that it pre-empted many of the textual and critical strategies of Queer Theory. Genet's perversity is a textual strategy designed to confound interpretations of his work as 'an expression of his homosexual "truth"'.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Stephens demonstrates that Genet's perversity included a confrontational appropriation of dominant norms in a way that, by deployment in a perverse and homoerotic narrative, deconstructs those norms. Genet, more than Cixous, seeks to problematize the very categories and norms to which he himself is subject, such as the terms "homosexual" and "criminal". This deconstruction of Genet's was often achieved by 'revealing the internal

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<sup>22</sup> Stephens, 157.

<sup>23</sup> Butler, J. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 93.

<sup>24</sup> Amin, 507.

contradictions of these norms, their intimate dependence on their constitutive 'outside', and their openness to corruption and contamination by this outside'.<sup>25</sup>

This is a notion originating in Queer Theory with Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick and Judith Butler. Although Stephens draws on Judith Butler's philosophy to theorize the ways that Genet's appropriation of norms foregrounds those norms' dependence on their constitutive other—and their openness to corruption and contamination by that other—she does not make an explicit argument for defining Genet's "perversity" as a kind of strategic textual performativity. This is a shame, if only because the connections are so apparent, but also because a more explicit statement of the performative nature of Genet's perversity would enable scholars to make easy connections between Stephens' research and other research around textual performativity; thus disseminating Stephens' ideas to a wider audience.

The circulation of these ideas, and those of other Queer Theory informed writer/researchers, can only enrich scholarly discussion and debate in the Creative Writing discipline. Much scholarship on creative writing and literature 'theorizes writing in terms of the unconscious and/or the creative "impulse", usually with reference to psychoanalytic theories'.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, a theorization of writing that is queered is likely to reject the sometimes "essentialist" tendencies of psychoanalytic discourse and might instead 'theorize writing in terms of performativity'.<sup>27</sup> By theorizing creative writing as performativity, it is possible to displace the entrenched and essentialist Romantic model of creative genius whilst simultaneously 'disrupting the notion that discursive subjectivities appearing within literary texts are

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<sup>25</sup> Amin, 507.

<sup>26</sup> Baker, D.J. 2010b. 'Queering Practice-Led Research: Subjectivity, Creative Practice and Performative Research', Conference Proceedings, *A Scholarly Affair*, Cultural Studies Association of Australasia National Conference, Byron Bay, 7-9 December 2010, 1-18. See page 8.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

representations of the internal, stable identity of the creator'.<sup>28</sup> Instead, creativity as performativity foregrounds the appearance of subjectivities within texts as a *deployment* or intervention into discourse for a critical or creative purpose.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the writing of queer subjectivities into literature is not seen as a reflection of a writer's identity, a representation of some imagined 'internal' self, but rather 'as a deliberate inscription and dissemination of non-normative discursive subjectivities'.<sup>30</sup>

Stephens makes this point clearly when she posits that Genet's writing:

...reframes its homoeroticism so that this is no longer seen as the expression of a queer exteriority – of a perverse author whose intentions determine the meaning of the text – but rather as a dynamic mobilized within that text.<sup>31</sup>

Stephens goes on to state that Genet's perversity (what we might call "queer writing") 'provides a way to maintain the centrality of sex and eroticism to the narrative without positioning these as the coherent expression of a stable sexual identity'<sup>32</sup> and that 'queer writing need neither naturalize nor negate the role (or queerness) of the writer'.<sup>33</sup> Stephens goes so far as to approach Genet 'not as an identifiable author or even as a stable thing but as an affect, a movement in and through the dominant language that disturbs and troubles it from within'.<sup>34</sup>

Stephens' study of Genet draws on both Queer and feminist poststructuralist theory in order to re-contextualize study of literature away from a focus on the psychobiographical approach towards an approach that disconnects authorial

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<sup>28</sup> Baker 2010b, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Stephens, 19.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Stephens, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Stephens, 21.

identity from discursive subjectivity and, significantly, sees the latter as a dynamic mobilized within text. The bringing together of Queer Theories and feminist poststructuralist ideas on writing is innovative in the discipline of Creative Writing—as well as long overdue—and shifts the emphasis of study from the author to the text. This shift is not undertaken in the somewhat “contextless” style of some Postmodern literary studies, that have also privileged text over author, but in a manner that focuses on the particular strategies leading to the text’s production; the way it was written.

In the discipline of Creative Writing, where literary texts are both studied and *produced*, the Postmodern negation of the author—epitomized by Roland Barthes’ proclamation of the death of the author—provokes tension around how to: a). theorize the study of writing without ignoring the act of production (textual strategies) and b). maintain the critical insights provided by Postmodernism and Poststructuralism without denying the contexts and practices unique to the production (writing) of texts. The research of Stephens and other Queer Theory informed writer-researchers within the discipline provide a method for doing exactly that, whilst also providing a methodology for theorizing the relationship between the corporeal and erotic specificity of the author and the erotics evidenced in their writing.

In conclusion, Stephens’ positing of ‘a specifically homoerotic writing’,<sup>35</sup> or *Écriture Homosexuelle*, that draws on feminist poststructuralist theories of *écriture féminine*, is innovative and provides a method for queer Creative Writing scholars to re-think how writing and discursive subjectivity are theorized. The notion of *Écriture*

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<sup>35</sup> Stephens, 23.

*Homosexuelle* also provides a template for how future study into written works that foreground sexual subjectivity might be undertaken.

Furthermore, *Queer Writing: Homoeroticism in Jean Genet's Fiction* also provides an example for writer/researchers of how to successfully theorize the practice of writing (their own and that of others) in a way that distances itself from the Romantic model which demands an overreliance on interpreting writing practice in terms of the writers' identity and/or subjectivity.

## Author Bio

D.J. Baker is in the final year of a Doctoral candidature in Writing at Griffith University and an academic in the School of Arts and Social Sciences at Southern Cross University. He is also a writer of poetry and short fiction with work published in the journals *TEXT*, *Lodestar Quarterly*, *Retort Magazine*, *Polari Journal* and in the anthologies *Anywhere But Here* (2006), *Bend, Don't Shatter* (2004), and *Dumped* (2000 and USA edition 2002). His research interests are Queer Theory and its application to subjectivity in the contexts of creative practice, Practice-Led Research and Creative Writing pedagogy.

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