Becoming a Monstrous Text? The Process of Grafting in the Work of Jean Genet and Jacques Derrida's *Glas*

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Abstract

The article analyses the connections between grafting and writing in both the work of Jean Genet and also Jacques Derrida's analysis (synthesis?) of Genet's work. Grafting and writing share a common etymological root: the Greek *graphein* ('to write'). It is particularly interesting to examine the relationship between these terms in Genet's biographical works (mainly *The Thief's Journal* and *Miracle of the Rose*), as his writing involves a many-layered grafting process. In addition, Derrida's book on Genet, *Glas*, besides reflecting on the link between writing and grafting in Genet's work, is essentially constructed out of quotations from Genet's texts that Derrida grafts onto his own writing. The article first considers the different modalities of grafting that are used in Genet's and Derrida's writing, before examining the reasons why such a process is at the core of their respective texts. Finally, it considers the extent to which this process leads these texts, made as they are from imported, sutured limbs, to become monstrous —— examples of what we could call a 'teratography'.

Keywords:

The processes of grafting and writing are not generally compared to each other even if they are in fact very closely related. The word 'graft' comes from the Latin *graphium* that originally designates a stylus, a steel point or an etching needle, that is any kind of instrument that was used for engraving and writing. The common origin of the grafting and the writing processes becomes even more obvious if we go back directly to the Greek etymon of the word — that is the verb *graphein* — which literally means 'to write'. In this article, I would like to analyse the connections and interactions between the grafting and the writing processes both in the work of the French writer Jean Genet and in the book Jacques Derrida dedicates to Genet's work, *Glas* (1974) where this issue acquires a central and specific role.

The inherent relationship between grafting and writing is indeed central in their respective texts as well as in their relationship to each other. In Genet's autobiographical novels, most

notably *The Thief's Journal* (1949) and *Miracle of the Rose* (1946), the link between grafting and writing is explored and developed both as a thematic and as a literary device: if there is a process of grafting enacted in his texts, his writing also grafts bits of former texts onto new ones. In *Glas*, Derrida reflects on Genet's writing in terms of its use and practice of grafting, while at the same time grafting Genet's texts into his own writing and commenting on this process.

This then leads us to ask such questions as: can the grafting process be understood as a text involving a palimpsest that is to be read and deciphered according to its incorporation in the new text? Conversely, can the writing process be thought of as a graft of an element onto another one?

In trying to answer these questions and to shed some light on the links between, on the one hand grafting and writing and, on the other, Genet's work and Derrida's text, the first part of this article focuses on the different modalities of grafting that are used in Genet's autobiographical novels and in Derrida's *Glas*. Subsequently, I consider the reasons why the grafting process might be seen as the core of Genet's writing and, after him, of Derrida's writing in *Glas*. Finally, I consider how far such an intensive use of the grafting process leads their respective texts, made from imported limbs sewn together, to become monstrous and the extent to which they provide examples of what we could call a 'teratography', or monstrous writing.

1. Modalities of the grafting process in Genet's autobiographical novels and in Derrida's *Glas*

In the writing of Jean Genet, the grafting process appears as much as a thematic, aesthetic and a poetic one. First, it is a theme that has already something monstrous about it, when, in *Querelle de Brest* (1953), for example, the twin brothers Georges and Querelle (who look exactly the same) desire to graft themselves onto each other during one of their fights:

> The two brothers were watching each other, knife in hand, their bodies upright, almost peaceful, as if they were about to march calmly one against the other to exchange, arm raised, the Florentine oath that is only to be uttered dagger in hand. Perhaps they were about to cut each other's flesh in order to sew themselves together, to graft themselves onto each other.[1]

In *The Thief's Journal*, we find another example of the thematic graft that is especially important as it works as a symbol for the aesthetic of the graft in Genet's writing. This example concerns Stilitano, a Serbian legionnaire deserter whose right hand has been amputated and with whom Genet falls in love. The overly virile and homosexually repressed Stilitano

[1] Jean Genet, *Querelle de Brest* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), p. 124. My translation.

habitually pins a fake bunch of grapes inside his trousers, just in front of his genitals. This grafted deformity makes him look like a monster and scares the men who try to seduce him. As Stilitano has only one operative hand, it is Genet's job to hang and to remove the bunch of grapes every day, a duty that he performs religiously. We read:

> With a gesture of his vivid hand, he motioned to me that he wanted to undress. As on other evenings, I got down on my knees to unhook the bunch of grapes. Inside his trousers was pinned one of those imitation bunches of thin cellulose grapes stuffed with cotton wool. (They are as big as greengage plums; elegant Spanish women of the period wore them on their loose-brimmed, straw sun bonnets.) Whenever a queer at the Criola, excited by the swelling, put his hand on Stilitano's basket, his horrified fingers would encounter this object, which he feared might be actual balls.[2]

But Genet is also perfectly aware of the function of this artificial bunch of grapes which in fact plays the role of a prosthesis for the missing hand:

> He wants to baffle and hurt, to disgust the very people who desire him, I say to myself when I think of him. As I ponder it more carefully, I am more disturbed by the idea – which I find pregnant with meaning – that Stilitano had bought a fake wound for that most noble spot (I know that he was magnificently hung) in order to save his lopped-off hand from scorn.[3]

In *Glas*, Derrida comments on the symbolic meaning and importance of this figure. For Derrida, Stilitano stands as an emblem of the writing process. Derrida pays attention to the signifier 'stilitano' and notes that the name refers to the stylite, namely he or she who holds the stylus that is used for engraving and writing — even if or, indeed, especially because, Stilitano's right hand is missing, that is to say the hand that usually holds the pen and therefore accomplishes the engraving or writing process. As such, Stilitano is also the stylist or style designer. This is why we find the bunch of grapes replacing his right hand, being both a representative for another stylus, the phallus, and standing for the rhetorical flowers (mainly metaphors and similes) that flourish in Genet's writing. Moreover, these highly elaborate and numerous rhetorical flowers are grafted onto thug's slang, which Stilitano can easily embody metonymically (as the thugs' boss, he is also the one who is in control of their specific language), and the mix of these two different uses of the language creates precisely Genet's very specific style made both of classical literary and learned French language and vulgar Parisian thieves' slang.

Finally, there is a third modality of grafting in Genet's writing: the quotation process. In his autobiographical novels, Genet quotes repeatedly and consistently his former texts, importing the limbs of old texts to new bodies of texts. In so doing, Genet builds his texts from each other in a kind of closed circuit whilst commenting on his own writing and literary choices

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2 Jean Genet, *The Thief's Journal*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 52.
3 Ibid., p. 54.

in several reflexive ways: from direct commentary to the use of footnotes. This constitutes the poetical aspect of the use of the grafting process in Genet's writing. Furthermore, the use of quotations then acquires retrospective importance as it is precisely such a process that is at the core of Derrida's writing in *Glas.*

Derrida's text on Genet is indeed replete with quotations from Genet's texts and produces at the same time a reflection on the overwhelming presence of the graft in his own writing. In *Glas*, the quotations can be short or very long (several pages), they appear randomly inside a sentence or more unexpectedly (but very frequently) inside a word and are disseminated in fragments, columns or paragraphs that are typographically distinct from each other and arranged in a patchwork manner on the same page. One can say, then, that Genet's body of texts is truly grafted onto Derrida's. In this regard, Derrida writes:

> The graft that sews itself the substitution of the supplementary *seing* 'constitutes' the text. Its necessary heterogeneity, its interminable network of listening lines *en allo*, in hello, that compels reckoning with the insert, the patch. Reading — its works with a prosthesis. Whose sound does not, as one could believe, on the contrary. It works and it sings with parenthesis in its body.[4]

Derrida's text is indeed grafted as it sews together bits of Genet and his own commentaries, as well as literally welcoming Genet's signature in his own text. His text is also heterogeneous as it includes something that is alien and refers to the outside, trying out different typographical and structural methods for hosting the texts of the other. Derrida's own body of text is willing to open itself to Genet's and to try to do so in every possible manner. Why, then, is the grafting process so important in their writing?

2. Etiology of the grafting process in Genet's autobiographical novels and Derrida's *Glas*

In his autobiographical novels, Genet grafts similar elements onto each other, either on a thematic level, with Georges and Querelle, whose likeness as twin brothers seems to be the reason for their desire to be grafted onto each other, or on the narrative level, with the grafting of elements taken from former books onto new ones. We might call this a form of intratextuality. The situation, then, is essentially different from the one we found in *Glas* as, for Genet, the grafting process is not a case of heterogeneity but, on the contrary, of homo or autogeneity (in botany, scientists speak of homo or autografts on the one hand and of hetero or xenografts on the other).

[4] Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. by John P. Leavey Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 118.

A graft (this time in the physical sense of the word) is usually made when a piece or lump of the receiving body is either missing or inoperative, such as the missing hand that is replaced by the bunch of grapes in the Stilitano example. In Genet's case, we know that what is missing is the knowledge of origin. Indeed, as a state-fostered child, Genet never knew who his parents were, nor did he have any family; for him, there was no close 'other' on whom to rely. This original lack and its role in his writing have been analysed by most of his critics, and especially by Sartre who gives it a full ontological dimension in his *Saint Genet*.[5]

Focusing on the onomastics of the name 'Genet', Nathalie Fredette finds the presence of this ontological lack inscribed in its signifying. According to her, Genet is the name of privation *par excellence*, both on an ontological level ('*Je n'est*', 'I is not') and on the level of possession ('*Je n'ai*', 'I have not'). She writes: 'in this regard, the enunciative project of he whose very name makes both negation (I do not have, I am not) and birth (I am born) intervene will be one of the most complex, and certainly rich in contradictions.'[6]

While we may wish to resist such a Cratylistic conception of the proper name and its relation to an individual's life, we can nevertheless demonstrate the manner in which Genet's work signals paradoxically and continuously that nothing is less original than the origin. To do so his texts constantly reread, quote and re-quote each other in order to create the illusion of finding their roots in themselves. Thus, Genet makes of his own text both a *cliché* of himself and a text by someone else. Consequently and paradoxically, the self-transplantation process that pretends to create an illusory autogenesis opens finally onto the other.

As we have seen in *Glas*, Derrida uses the same device in reproducing Genet's grafting practice and applying it to his own critical writing. In this regard, he writes:

> What is it about, all in all? Quoting, reciting the broom ['genet' in French] page upon page? An anthology? What right do we have? And the complete text, is it to be concealed inside? Bits of anthology, which invite us, if possible, to link up, and in any case to reread. Backwards and forwards, starting over at every turn.[7]

In his text, Derrida certainly mimics and amplifies Genet's grafting practice but at the same time also solves Genet's desire for origin and the other. In a retrospective twist, Genet becomes both the origin of Derrida's text and the embodiment of the other, who is constantly quoted, grafted.

However, in being made from imported and sutured limbs (in Derrida's case), in pretending to negate the ideas of the origin and the other (in Genet's case) and, as such, asking to be

5 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet. Comédien et Martyr* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952).
6 Nathalie Fredette, *Figures baroques de Jean Genet* (Montréal: XYZ, 2001), p. 16. My translation.
7 Derrida, *Glas*, p. 92.

perpetually linked up and reread, do the texts finally not become some kind of monsters? Even, are they not just monstrous?

3. The texts as monsters: two cases of teratography?

There is, of course, a real interest for and concern with monsters in Genet's texts. Most of his characters — the numerous murderers, thieves, traitors, prisoners, male prostitutes, pimps and transvestites — are very often designated as monstrous. He is fascinated by what he calls the 'beautiful monsters', that is to say good-looking men with evil souls. We also saw that this *teratophily* (from the Greek *teratos*: 'monster' and *philos*: 'love') is willingly taken over by what we could call a phenomenon of *teratogenesis* (or 'creation of monsters'). Genet likes to create monstrous entities, be it physical ones, such as the two brothers Georges and Querelle (who, in addition to being called monsters, are imagined being sewn and grafted together as a two-headed monster) or Stilitano (whose hand is missing and genitals deformed), or textual ones.

Thus, one can wonder whether Genet's texts are monstrous due to the self-transplantation process they use so willingly in order to mask the double absence of ontological origin and otherness. In this regard, however, Derrida does not argue that Genet's writing is monstrous but that it is *colossal*. According to him this colossal writing is a writing that doubles itself and creates a double of Genet who can then find his origin in another who is also himself. Derrida plays here with the etymology of the word '*colossus*' that designates in Greek a statue representing an absent or dead person. In doubling his characters and his texts by continuously grafting and quoting them, Genet creates in his books his own double, or *colossus*, that replaces the dead person of the missing origin.

Interestingly, we find a completely different definition of the colossal in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* which is precisely opposed to the monstrous:

> An object is monstrous if by its magnitude it annihilates the end which its concept constitutes. The mere presentation of a concept, however, which is almost too great for all presentation (which borders on the relatively monstrous) is called colossal, because the end of the presentation of a concept is made more difficult if the intuition of the object is almost too great for our faculty of apprehension.[8]

Are Genet's texts colossal, then? One can argue that the absence of origin and of otherness, while too great for our apprehension, is nevertheless given a form — as something that is almost too great — in Genet's texts. He creates in his writing an illusion of absence of origin and

[8] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 136.

otherness that can be apprehended. Genet's texts would then fit into the category of the colossal. Furthermore, in his texts, the grafted elements from other texts are seamlessly incorporated and assimilated, conceptually, structurally and syntactically. The graft takes: the two entities constitute a homogeneous whole.

Derrida's *Glas* seems, on the contrary, to fit with the monstrous in several respects. To start with, if we understand the term 'monstrous' as that which is shown or shows itself, remembering that the word 'monster' comes from the Latin *monstrare* that means 'to show', Derrida's *Glas* can be said to be monstrous because it exhibits its use of the graft as its main writing process and comments upon it openly. The grafting of Genet's texts and of dictionary definitions (which also play with etymology) are left as such in the text and none of them introduced with colons, speech marks, explanatory or presenting sentences.

Subsequently, the text and its writing can be described as monstrous precisely because of this dismembered and fragmented aspect. It shows itself as a body, a *corpus* that has been made out of different kinds of limbs, not unlike Frankenstein's creature constructed out of bits of different bodies, the stitches and sutures remaining visible. One could even go further in saying that the pieces seem just to lay still next to each other. In this regard, the graft does not take as well as it does in Genet's texts. It is in fact Derrida's own text and not Genet's that needs to be continuously reread in order for the reading (and therefore the reader who becomes a kind of doctor) to make the graft work by linking, sewing the pieces together and realising the stitching process. Derrida implicitly acknowledges this aspect of his text whilst portraying it as a hideous and repulsive monster:

> what affords reading affords readings by citations (necessarily truncated, clippings, repetitions, suctions, sections, suspensions, selections, stitchings, scarrings, grafts, postiches, organs without their own proper body, proper body covered with cuts, traversed with lice).[9]

Moreover, Derrida's text is also distorted and deformed by the abundance of grafted quotations we find in it. It seems to crack, to pull on its borders and to be about to explode like an over-inflated balloon whose surface will soon be torn apart. Derrida's writing is so grafted that it seems, to use Kant's words, to 'annihilate its end which its concept constitutes', and we are therefore not surprised to note that *Glas* ends with an unfinished sentence and no final full stop. These are the last words of *Glas*: 'What I had dreaded, naturally, already, republishes itself. Today, here, now, the debris of.'[10] As it overtakes its own end and finality, the text is well and truly monstrous.

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[9] Derrida, *Glas*, p. 168.
[10] Ibid., p. 262.

The grafting process at work in Derrida's writing makes it an example of what we could call a *teratography* or monstrous writing (a writing in which the graft of quotations imported from other texts does not work by itself, leading the text to overtake its own end and finally to explode), while the grafting process at work in Genet's writing remains a classical case of intratextuality (the graft of quotations takes well and the new text, even if *almost* overtaking its own end, is eventually both autonomous and homogeneous).

Conclusion

Having compared the use of the graft both in Genet's autobiographical novels and in Derrida's *Glas*, we have been able to point out the specificities of their respective writing practices in this regard. For both of them, grafting is as much a thematic as a poetics: their writings address the graft at the same time as they practice it. Nevertheless, if Genet's grafting process can be described as an example of intratextuality (quotation of his previous texts in a new one) or even sometimes infratextuality (he quotes the text he is actually writing, as is the case in *The Thief's Journal*), Derrida's could be described at first sight as an example of intertextuality, a description I have shown to be inaccurate.

Genet uses this self-quotation process in order to compensate for the constitutive lack from which his work emerges, thus creating the illusion of a self-created origin and paradoxically introducing the notion of otherness at the very core of sameness. In *Glas*, Derrida mimics and amplifies Genet's grafting process and, in so doing, inverts the situation: Genet becomes the very origin of his text and embodies the other. Derrida's text is kept open whereas Genet's texts create the illusion of being closed upon themselves.[11] The illusion is also a visual one, since Genet's texts are written in consistently long and serried rows with very few chapters and indentations (occasionally none at all), whereas Derrida's is replete with gaps and blank spaces.

In this respect, Genet's texts could be thought to be monstrous: they refuse the notions of origin and true otherness at the same time as they openly express their fascination for monsters and monstrous figures that they willingly create. However, Derrida describes Genet's writing as 'colossal', which means that his texts stand as a double of the missing original other. In addition, Genet's writing can also be called colossal in a Kantian sense as it presents concepts that are almost too great for our apprehension: the lack of origin and otherness would be too great to apprehend if it were real but can be apprehended as it is mere illusion.

[11] From a Derridean perspective, Genet's texts are of course open for the simple reason that they are texts and in virtue of using language. His texts are also obviously open by virtue of the use they make of intertextuality (numerous references are implicitly made to major texts such as the Bible, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, picaresque novels, etc.).

Finally, it appears that Derrida's writing can be said to be monstrous: it exhibits its grafting process and it is made from different imported limbs grafted onto each other. However, the graft does not seem to take — and this is its work — as the pieces are simply put next to (sometimes into) each other, requiring the reader to realise the stitching process during his or her own reading. Furthermore, the text is so grafted that it becomes cracked and distorted and eventually annihilates the finality of its own end.

If the grafting process enables Genet's writing to hold itself together, on the contrary it leads Derrida's to explode and, as a consequence, to tear apart the bits of Genet.

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