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Lee Edelman

The Future is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive

Allow me, by way of introduction, to call your attention to a recent, minor, and short-lived political controversy, one that citizens of the United States have been rightly unwilling to fret about amid all the other incidents by which the press would have us be scandalized. According to an article in the *New York Times*, a series of public service announcements featuring President and Mrs. Clinton and sponsored by the Ad Council, a nonprofit organization, have "raise[d] questions about where politics stops and public service begins" (Bennet A18). These "questions," for those who have chosen to raise them, center on a fear that these commercial spots, however briefly and unexpectedly caught in the glare of the media spotlight, might burnish the President's image, and thus increase his political clout, insofar as they show him in a role construed as inherently non-political. By depicting the President, in the words of the *Times*, as "a concerned, hard-working parent," one who attends to the well-being of children unable to protect themselves, these public service announcements on behalf of the "Coalition for America's Children" could have the effect of heightening his moral stature with the American electorate, or so fears Alex Castellanos, a Republican media consultant. "This is the father picture," he fulminates in the pages of the *Times*, "this is the daddy bear, this is the head of the political household. There's nothing that helps him more" (Bennet A18).

But what helps him most in this public appeal for parental involvement with children is the social consensus that such an appeal is *distinct* from the realm of politics; indeed, though these public service announcements conclude with a rhetorical flourish evocative of an ongoing political campaign ("We're fighting for the children. Whose side are you on?"), that rhetoric is intended precisely to assert that this issue *has* only one side. And while such apparently self-evident one-sidedness—the affirmation of so uncontested, because so uncontroversial, a cultural value as that con-

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densed in the figure of the child whose innocence cries out for defense—is precisely what ought to distinguish the public service spots from the more volatile discourse of political persuasion, I want to suggest that this is also what makes them so oppressively, and so dangerously, political: political not in the partisan terms implied by the media consultant, but political in a far more insidious way; political insofar as the universalized fantasy subtending the image of the child coercively shapes the structures within which the "political" itself can be thought. For politics, however radical the means by which some of its practioners seek to effect a more desirable social order, is conservative insofar as it necessarily works to *affirm* a social order, defining various strategies aimed at actualizing social reality and transmitting it into the future it aims to bequeath to its inner child. What, in that case, would it signify *not* to be "fighting for the children"? How, then, to take the *other* "side" when to take a side at all necessarily constrains one to take the side of, by virtue of taking a side within, a political framework that compulsively returns to the child as the privileged ensign of the future it intends?

In what follows I want to interrogate the politics that informs the pervasive trope of the child as figure for the universal value attributed to political futurity and to pose against it the impossible project of a queer oppositionality that would oppose itself to the structural determinants of politics as such, which is also to say, that would oppose itself to the logic of opposition. This paradoxical formulation suggests the energy of resistance—the characteristically perverse resistance informing the work of queer theory—to the substantialization of identities, especially as defined through opposition, as well as to the political fantasy of shaping history into a narrative in which meaning succeeds in revealing itself, *as itself*, through time. By attempting to resist that coercive faith in political futurity, while refusing as well any hope for the sort of dialectical access to meaning that such resistance, as quintessential political gesture, holds out, I mean to insist that politics is always a politics of the signifier, and that queer theory's interventions in the reproduction of dominant cultural logics must never lose sight of its figural relation to the vicissitudes of signification. Queer theory, as a particular story of where storytelling fails, one that takes the value and burden of that failure upon itself, occupies, I want to suggest, the impossible "other" side where narrative realization and derealization overlap. The rest of this paper aspires to explain the meaning and implications of that assertion, but to do so it must begin by tracing some connections between politics and the politics of the sign.

Like the network of signifying relations Lacan described as the symbolic, politics may function as the register within which we experience social reality, but only insofar as it compels us to experience that reality in the form of a fantasy: the fantasy, precisely, of form as such, of an order, an organization, assuring the stability of our identities as subjects and the consistency of the cultural structures through which those identities are reflected back to us in recognizable form. Though the material conditions of human experience may indeed be at stake in the various conflicts by means of which differing political perspectives vie for the power to name, and by naming to shape, our collective reality, the ceaseless contestation between and among their competing social visions expresses a common will to install as reality itself one libidinally-subtended fantasy or another and thus to avoid traumatically con-

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fronting the emptiness at the core of the symbolic "reality" produced by the order of the signifier. To put this otherwise: politics designates the ground on which imaginary relations, relations that hark back to a notion of the self misrecognized as enjoying an originary fullness—an undifferentiated presence that is posited retroactively and therefore lost, one might say, from the start—compete for symbolic fulfillment within the dispensation of the signifier. For the mediation of the signifier alone allows us to *articulate* these imaginary relations, though always at the price of introducing the distance that precludes their realization: the distance inherent in the chain of ceaseless deferrals and mediations to which the very structure of the linguistic system must give birth. The signifier, as alienating and meaningless token of our symbolic construction as subjects, as token, that is, of our subjectification through subjection to the prospect of meaning; the signifier, by means of which we always inhabit the order of the Other, the order of a social and linguistic reality articulated from somewhere else; the signifier, which calls us into meaning by seeming to call us to ourselves, only ever confers upon us a sort of *promissory* identity, one with which we never succeed in fully coinciding because we, as subjects of the signifier, can only be signifiers ourselves: can only ever aspire to catch up to—to close the gap that divides and by dividing calls forth—ourselves as subjects. Politics names those processes, then, through which the social subject attempts to secure the conditions of its consolidation by identifying with what is outside it in order to bring it into the presence, deferred perpetually, of itself.

Thus, if politics in the symbolic is always a politics *of* the symbolic, operating in the name, and in the direction, of a future reality, the vision it hopes to realize is rooted in an imaginary past. This not only means that politics conforms to the temporality of desire, to what we might call the inevitable historicity of desire—the successive displacements forward of figures of meaning as nodes of attachment, points of intense metaphoric investment, produced in the hope, however vain, of filling the gap within the subject that the signifier installs—but also that politics is a name for the temporalization of desire, for its translation into a narrative, for its teleological representation. Politics, that is, by externalizing and configuring in the fictive form of a narrative, allegorizes or elaborates sequentially those overdeterminations of libidinal positions and inconsistencies of psychic defenses occasioned by the intractable force of the drives unassimilable to the symbolic's logic of interpretation and meaning-production, drives that carry the destabilizing force of what insists outside or beyond, because foreclosed by, signification. These drives hold the place of what meaning misses in much the same way that the signifier, in its stupidity, its intrinsic meaninglessness, preserves at the heart of the signifying order the irreducible void that order as such undertakes to conceal. Politics, in short, gives us history as the staging of a dream of self-realization through the continuous negotiation and reconstruction of reality itself; but it does so without acknowledging that the future to which it appeals marks the impossible place of an imaginary past exempt from the deferrals intrinsic to the symbolic's signifying regime.

Small wonder then that the post-Kantian era of the universal subject should produce as the figure of politics, because also as the figure of futurity collapsing undecidably into the past, the image of the child as we know it. Historically constructed,

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as numerous scholars, including Phillipe Ariès, Lawrence Stone, and James Kincaid, have made clear, to serve as the figural repository for sentimentalized cultural identifications, the child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and been enshrined as the figure for whom that order must be held in perpetual trust. The image itself, however, in its coercive universalization, works to discipline political discourse by consigning it always to accede in advance to the reality of a collective futurity whose figurative status we are never permitted to acknowledge or address. From Delacroix's iconic image of Liberty urging us into a brave new world of revolutionary hope, her bare breast making each spectator the unweaned child to whom it belongs, to the equally universalized waif in the logo that performs in miniature the "politics" of the mega-musical *Les Miz*, we are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the child.

And so, for example, when P. D. James, in her novel, *The Children of Men*, attempts to imagine the social effects of a future in which the human race has suffered a seemingly absolute loss of the capacity to reproduce, her narrator not only, predictably enough, attributes this reversal of biological fortune to the putative crisis of sexual values in late twentieth-century democracies—"Pornography and sexual violence on film, on television, in books, in life had increased and became more explicit but less and less in the West we made love and bred children" (James 10), he declares—but also gives voice to the ideological truism that governs our investment in the child as emblem of fantasmatic futurity: "without the hope of posterity, for our race if not for ourselves, without the assurance that we being dead yet live," her narrator notes, "all pleasures of the mind and senses sometimes seem to me no more than pathetic and crumbling defences shored up against our ruins" (13). While the plangent allusion to "The Waste Land" here may recall another of its well-known lines, one for which, apparently, we have Vivienne Eliot to thank, "What you get married for if you don't want children?," it also brings out the function of the child as prop of the secular theology upon which our common reality rests—the secular theology that shapes at once the meaning of our collective narratives and our collective narratives of meaning. Charged, after all, with the task of assuring "that we being dead yet live," the child, as if by nature, indeed as the living promise of a natural transcendence of the limits of nature itself, exudes the very pathos from which the narrator of *The Children of Men* recoils when mirrored back in the non-reproductive "pleasures of the mind and senses." For the "pathetic" quality he projectively locates in all such forms of enjoyment exposes the fetishistic figurations of the child that the narrator offers against them as legible in terms identical to those whereby pleasures pursued in the absence of "hope of posterity" are scorned: legible, that is, as nothing more than so many "pathetic and crumbling defences shored up against our ruins." Indeed, how better to characterize the narrative project of the text itself, which ends as any reader not born yesterday expects, with renewal of the barren world through the miracle of birth.

And if the author of *The Children of Men*, like the parents of mankind's children, succumbs without struggle to the mystifications of the all-pervasive, self-congratulatory, and stategically misrecognized narcissism endlessly animating

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pronatalism, why should we be the least bit surprised when her narrator insists, with what fully deserves to be characterized as a "straight face," that "sex totally divorced from procreation has become almost meaninglessly acrobatic" (167)? Which is, of course, to say no more than that sexual practice will be made to allegorize the vicissitudes of meaning so long as the heterosexually-specific alibi of reproductive necessity covers up the drive *beyond* meaning that drives the symbolic's machinery of sexual meaningfulness and erotic relationality. The child whose pure possibility suffices to spirit away the naked truth of heterosexual sex, seeming to impregnate heterosexuality itself with the future of signification by bestowing upon it the cultural burden of signifying the future, figures an identification with an always about-to-be-realized identity—an identity intent on disavowing the threat to the symbolic order of meaning that inheres in a structure of desire that drives us to seek fulfillment in a meaning unable, *as* meaning, to fulfill us: unable, that is, to close the gap in identity that "meaning" means.

The consequences of such a compulsory identification both of and with the child as the culturally pervasive emblem of the motivating end, albeit endlessly postponed, of every political vision *as a vision of futurity*, must weigh upon the consideration of a queer oppositional politics. For the only queerness that queer sexualities could ever hope to claim would spring from their determined opposition to this underlying structure of the political—their opposition, that is, to the fantasmatic ambition of achieving symbolic closure through the marriage of identity to futurity in order to reproduce the social subject. Conservatives, of course, understand this in ways most liberals never can, since conservatism profoundly imagines the radical rupturing of the social fabric, while liberalism conservatively clings to a faith in its limitless elasticity. The discourse of the right thus tends toward a greater awareness of, and an insistence on, the figural logics implicit in the social relations we inhabit and enact, while the discourse of the left tends to understand better the capacity of the symbolic to accomodate change by displacing those figural logics onto history as the unfolding of narrative sequence.

Consider, for example, a local moment from the ongoing campaign around abortion. Not long ago, on a much-traveled corner in Cambridge, Massachusetts, opponents of the legal right to abortion posted an enormous image of a full-term fetus on a rented billboard accompanied by a simple and unqualified assertion: "It's not a choice; it's a child." Many critics, Barbara Johnson among them, have detailed with powerful insight how such anti-abortion polemics simultaneously rely on and generate tropes that animate, by personifying, the fetus, determining in advance the answer to the juridical question of its personhood by the terms with which the fetus, and thus the question, is addressed. Rather than attempting a deconstruction of this rhetorical instance, however (rather, that is, than note, for example, the collocation of the objectifying pronoun, "it," and the quintessentially humanizing epithet, "child," in order to see how this fragment of discourse maintains the undecidability it seems intended to resolve, casting doubt, therefore, on the truth of its statement by the form of its enunciation), I want to focus instead, for a moment, on the ideological truth its enunciation, unintentionally perhaps, makes clear.

For as strange as it may seem for a gay man to say this, when I first encountered that billboard in Cambridge I read it as addressed to me. The sign, after all,

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might as well have pronounced, and with the same absolute and invisible authority that testifies to the successfully accomplished work of ideological naturalization, the divine injunction: "Be fruitful and multiply." Like an anamorphotic distortion that only comes into focus when approached from an angle, the slogan acquired, through the obliquity of my subjective relation to it, a logic that served to articulate together the common stake in opposition to abortion and to the practice of queer sexualities—a common stake well understood (if only as the literalization of a figural identity) by radical groups like the one behind the January 1997 bombings of a lesbian bar and an abortion clinic in Atlanta. For the billboard, in this exemplary of the truths that right-wing discourse makes evident, understood what left-wing discourse prefers to keep concealed: that the true compulsion, the imperative that affords us as subjects no meaningful choice, is the compulsion to embrace our own futurity in the privileged form of the child and thereby to imagine the present as pregnant with the child of our identifications, as pregnant, that is, with a meaning to fill up the hole in the signifying order opened up by the distance, the internal division, produced through our subjection to the symbolic's logic of "meaning" itself.

Thus the left no more than the right will speak in *favor* of abortion; it, as the billboard cannily notes, aligns itself only with choice. And who, indeed, would speak *for* abortion, who would speak against reproduction, against futurity, and hence against life? Who would destroy the child and with it the sustaining fantasy of somehow bridging the signifying gap (a fantasy that serves to protect us against the violence of the drives insofar as it distracts us from seeing how thoroughly it compels us to enact them)? The right once again knows the answer, knows that the true oppositional politics implicit in the practice of queer sexualities lies not in the liberal discourse, the patient negotiation, of tolerances and rights, important as these undoubtedly are to all of us still denied them, but rather in the capacity of queer sexualities to figure the radical dissolution of the contract, in every sense social and symbolic, on which the future as guarantee against the return of the real, and so against the insistence of the death drive, depends. It is in this sense that we should listen to, and even perhaps be instructed by, the readings of queer sexualities produced by the forces of reaction. However much we might wish, for example, to reverse the system of values informing the following quotation from Donald Wildmon, founder and head of the deeply reactionary American Family Association, we would surely do well to consider it less as hyperbolic rant and more as a reminder of the disorientation that queer oppositionality entails: "Acceptance or indifference to the homosexual movement will result in society's destruction by allowing civil order to be redefined and by plummeting ourselves, our children and grandchildren into an age of godlessness. Indeed, the very foundation of Western Civilization is at stake" (Wildmon). Before the standard discourse of liberal pluralism spills from our lips, before we supply once more the assurance that ours is another kind of love but a love like his nonetheless, before we piously invoke the litany of our glorious contributions to civilizations of East and West alike, dare we take a moment and concede that Mr. Wildmon might be right, that the queerness of queer theory should tend precisely toward such a redefinition of civil order itself through a rupturing of our foundational faith in the reproduction of futurity?

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It is true, of course, that the ranks of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered parents swell larger now than the belly sufficient to house that anti-abortion billboard's poster child for children. And nothing intrinsic to the constitution of persons who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, transexual, or queer predisposes them to resist the appeal of the future, to refuse the temptation to reproduce, or to place themselves outside or against the acculturating logic of the symbolic; neither, indeed, is there any ground we could stand on outside of that logic. But politics, construed as oppositional or not, never rests on essential identities; it centers, instead, on the figurality that is always essential *to* identity, and thus on the figural relations in which social identities are always inscribed. And so, when I argue, as I intend to do here, that the burden of queerness is to be located less in the assertion or reification of an oppositional political identity than in opposition to politics as the fantasy of realizing, in an always indefinite future, imaginary identities foreclosed by the fact of our constitutive subjection to the signifier, I am not suggesting a platform or position from which queer subjects or queer sexualities might finally and truly become themselves, as if they could somehow manage thereby to realize their essential queerness. I am suggesting instead that the efficacy of queerness, its strategic value, resides in its capacity to expose as figural the symbolic reality that invests us as subjects insofar as it simultaneously constrains us in turn to invest ourselves in *it*, to cling to its fictions as reality, since we are only able to live within, and thus may be willing to die to maintain, the figures of meaning that pass as the very material of literal truth.

The child, in the historical epoch of our current epistemological regime, is the figure for that compulsory investment in the misrecognition of figure; it takes its place on the social stage like every adorable Annie gathering her limitless funds of pluck to "stick out her chin/ and grin/ and say/ 'Tomorrow,/ tomorrow,/ I love you tomorrow,/ you're only a day away.'" And lo and behold, as viewed through the distorting prism of the tears she calls forth, the figure of this child seems to shimmer with the irridescent promise of Noah's rainbow, serving, like the rainbow, as the pledge of a covenant to shield us against the threat of apocalypse now—or apocalypse later. Recall, for example, the end of *Philadelphia*, Jonathan Demme's cinematic atonement for what some construed as the homophobia of *The Silence of the Lambs*. After saintly Tom Hanks, last seen on his deathbed in an oxygen mask that slyly alludes to, if only by virtue of troping upon, Hannibal Lecter's more memorable muzzle, has shuffled off this mortal coil to stand, as we are led to suppose, before a higher law, we find ourselves in, if not at, his wake surveying a room in his family home crowded with children and pregnant women whose reassuringly bulging bellies, lingered upon by the camera, displace the bulging basket (unseen) of the HIV-positive gay man (unseen) from whom, as the filmic text suggests, in a cinema given over, unlike the one in which we sit taking in *Philadelphia*, to explicit depictions of gay male sex, our Tom himself was infected by the virus that finally cost him his life. And when, in the film's final sequence, we look at the videotaped representation of our dead hero as a boy, can the tears that this shot would solicit fail to burn with an indignation directed not only against the homophobic world that sought to crush the man this boy was destined to become, but also against the homosexual

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world within which boys like this grow up to have crushes on other men? For the cult of the child permits no shrines to the queerness of boys or girls, since queerness, for the culture at large, as for *Philadelphia* in particular, is understood as bringing children and childhood to an end. The occasion of a gay man's death thus provides a perfect opportunity to unleash once more the disciplinary force of the figure of the child performing the mandatory cultural labor of social reproduction, a force we encounter continuously as the lives, the speech, and the freedoms of adults, especially queer adults, continue to suffer restriction out of deference to imaginary children whose futures, as if they were permitted to have them except insofar as they consist in transmitting them to children of their own, could only be endangered by the social disease as which queer sexualities register. Nor should we forget the extent to which AIDS, for which to this day the most effective name to be associated with the appropriation of funds in the U.S. Congress is that of a child, Ryan White, reinforces a much older linkage, as old as the gay-inflection given to the Biblical narrative of Sodom, between practices of gay sexuality and disappropriation from the promise of futurity, a linkage on which Anita Bryant could draw in waging her anti-gay campaign under the rubric of "Save Our Children."

While lesbians and gay men by the thousands work for the right to marry, to serve in the military, to adopt and raise children of their own, the right simply opens its closet and asks us to kneel at the shrine of the child: the child who might be subjected to physical or intellectual molestation; the child who might witness lewd or inappropriately intimate behavior; the child who might discover information about queer sexualities on the internet; the child who might choose a provocative book from the shelves of the public library; the child, in short, who might find an enjoyment that would nullify the figural value invested by the force of adult desire in the child as unmarked by the adult's adulterating implication in desire itself; the child, that is, compelled to image, for the satisfaction of adults, an imaginary fullness thought to want, and thus to want for, nothing. As Lauren Berlant puts it cogently in the introduction to *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, "a nation made for adult citizens has been replaced by one imagined for fetuses and children" (1). On every side, the present enjoyment of our liberties as citizens is eclipsed by the lengthening shadow of the child whose phantasmatic freedom to develop unmarked by encounters with an "otherness" of which its parents either do not or *should* not approve, unimpaired by any collision with the reality of alien desires, terroristically holds us all in check and determines that political discourse conform to the logic of a narrative in which history unfolds the future for a figural child who must never grow up. That child, immured in an innocence seen as continuously under seige, embodies a fantasy unable to withstand the queerness of queer sexualities precisely insofar as it promises the perpetuation of the same, the return, by way of the future, to an imaginary past. It denotes, in this, the *homo*sexuality intrinsic to the proper functioning of the heterosexual order: the erotically charged investment in the sameness of identity that is guaranteed oppositionally and realized in the narrative of reproductive futurity. And so, the radical right insists, the battle to preserve what Michael Warner describes as "heteronormativity" amounts to a life and death struggle over the future of the child whose ruin feminists, queers, and pro-choice activists intend.

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Indeed, according to the bomb-making guide produced by the so-called Army of God, the group that claimed, correctly or not, responsibility for attacks on an abortion clinic and a lesbian bar in Atlanta, their purpose was to "disrupt and ultimately destroy Satan's power to kill our children, God's children" (Sack A13).

While we continue to refute the lies that pervade these insidious right-wing diatribes, do we also have the courage to acknowledge, and embrace, their correlative truths? Are we willing, as queers, to be sufficiently oppositional to the structural logic of opposition—oppositional, that is, to the logic by which political engagement serves always as the medium for reproducing our social reality—to accept that the figural burden of queerness, the burden that queerness is phobically produced in order to represent, is that of the agency of disfiguration that punctures the fictions of the symbolic, shattering its persistent fantasy of recapturing a lost imaginary unity, by obtruding upon it the void of what remains necessarily unsymbolizable, the gap or wound of the real that insists as a death drive within the symbolic? Not that we are—or, indeed, could be—committed to living outside the figures that constitute the symbolic; but perhaps we can begin to explore the possibilities of acceding to our construction as figures bodying forth, within the logic of narrative, the dissolution of that very logic.

The death drive, after all, refers to an energy of mechanistic compulsion whose structural armature exceeds the specific object, the specific content, toward which we might feel that it impels us. That object, that content, is never "it," and could never, possessed, truly satisfy; for the drive itself insists, and whatever the thing to which we mistakenly interpret its insistence to pertain, it is always only a grammatical placeholder deceiving us into reading the drive's compulsive insistence as transitive. But the structural mandate of the drive within the order of the symbolic produces that content, that thing, as mere displacement: as allegorization, within the governing logic of narrative transitivity, of its own differential force. That is why Lacan can declare that "if everything that is immanent or implicit in the chain of natural events may be considered as subject to the so-called death drive, it is only because there is a signifying chain" (1992, 212). And we can locate this reading of the death drive in terms of the figural economy inherent in the "chain of natural events" central to narrative if we conceptualize the play and place of the death drive in relation to a theory of irony, that queerest of rhetorical devices, especially as construed by Paul de Man. Proposing that "any theory of irony is the undoing, the necessary undoing, of any theory of narrative," de Man asserts a tension between irony as a particular trope and narrative as the representational mode he construes as the allegory of tropes, as the attempt to account for trope systematically by reading it as the site of a meaning that reflects a dialetical consciousness confronting its status as subject to the signifier (176–77). The corrosive force of irony carries a charge for de Man quite similar to that of the death drive for Lacan. "Words have a way of saying things which are not at all what you want them to say, " de Man observes; "There is a machine there, a text machine, an implacable determination and a total arbitrariness . . . which inhabits words on the level of the play of the signifier, which undoes any narrative consistency of lines, and which undoes the reflexive and dialectical model, both of which are, as you know, the basis of any narration" (181). This mindless

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violence of the textual machine, implacable and arbitrary, threatens, like a guillotine, to sever the integrity of narrative genealogy, recasting its narrative "chain of . . . events" as merely a "signifying chain" that inscribes in the realm of signification, along with unwanted meanings, the meaninglessness of the machinery that puts signification into play.

What is this but the death drive, which Barbara Johnson in a different context evokes as "a kind of unthought remainder . . . a formal overdetermination that is, in Freud's case, going to produce repetition or, in deconstruction's case, may inhere in linguistic structures that don't correspond to anything else" (98)? Irony may be one of the names for the force of that unthought remainder; queerness is surely another. Queer theory, then, should be viewed as a site at which a culturally repudiated irony, phobically displaced by the dominant culture onto the figure of the queer, is uncannily returned by those who propose to embrace such a figural identity with the *figuralization* of identity itself. Where the critical interventions of identitarian minorities, not excluding those seeking to substantialize the identities of lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men, may properly take shape as oppositional, reassuringly confronting the dominant order with the symmetrical image of its own achieved identity as social authority, queer theory's opposition, instead, is to the logic of oppositionality; its proper task the perpetual disappropriation of propriety.

It is not, therefore, a matter of either being or becoming, but rather of *embodying*, within the historical moment that imposes upon us such a figural association, the unsymbolizable remainder of the real produced by the order of meaning as the token of what that order is necessarily barred from being able to signify. One name given to this unnameable remainder by Lacan is "jouissance," occasionally translated as "enjoyment": the sense of a violent passage beyond the circumscriptions inherent in meaning that can have the effect, insofar as it gets attached, fetishistically, to a privileged object, of defining and congealing our experiential identities around fantasies of fulfillment through that object, but that also can function, insofar as it escapes such fetishistic reification, to rupture, or at least to seem to rupture, the consistency of a symbolic reality organized around the signifier as substantial identity, as name. Hence there is another name that can designate the unnameability to which the experience of jouissance can appear to give us access: "behind what is named, there is the unnameable," writes Lacan. "It is in fact because it is unnameable, with all the resonances you can give to this name, that it's akin to the quintessential unnameable, that is to say to death" (1991, 211). The death drive, then, manifests itself, though in radically different guises, in both versions of jouissance. To the extent that jouissance, as fantasmatic escape from the alienation intrinsic to meaning, and thus to the symbolic, lodges itself in an object on which our identities then come to depend, it produces those identities as mortifications, reenactments of the very constraints of meaning they were intended to help us escape. But to the extent that jouissance as a tear in the fabric of symbolic reality as we know it unravels the solidity of every object, including the object as which the subject necessarily takes itself, it evokes the death drive that always insists on the void both in and of the subject beyond its fantasy of self-realization in the domain of the pleasure principle.

Bound up with the first of these death drives we find the figure of the child, en-

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acting the law of perpetual repetition as it fixes our identity through identification with the futurity of the social order; bound up with the second, the figure of the queer localizes that order's traumatic encounter with its own inescapable failure, its encounter, that is, with the illusory status of its faith in the future as suture, as balm for the wound as which the subject of the signifier experiences its alienation in meaning. In the preface to *Homographesis*, I wrote that "gay," understood "as a figure for the textuality, the rhetoricity, of the sexual . . . designates the gap or incoherence that every discourse of 'sexuality' or 'sexual identity' would master" (xv); I am now extending that claim by suggesting that queer sexualities, within the framework of the social text we inhabit, figure the gap in which the symbolic confronts what its discourse can never know. It is certainly the case that this production of the queer as the figural signifier of what the signifying system constitutively fails to name reassures by seeming to span the abyss opened up by the signifier itself, reassures by giving a name to the unnameable—a name such as "faggot," or "dyke," or "queer"—and construing in the form of an object what threatens the consistency of objects as such. But it is also the case that the righteous protestations against this figural positioning by those called upon historically to personify it, while enabling the gradual extension of rights and benefits to those denied them, *similarly* reassures by suggesting the seamless coherence of the symbolic, suggesting that its logic of narrative supersedes the corrosive force of our irony. For every expression of opposition to the figural status to which we are called affirms the triumph of history as story, as the narrative allegorization of the irony that is trope.

It may seem, from within this structure, that the symbolic can only win; but that, of course, is to ignore the fact that it also can only lose. For the division on which the subject rests, opening it to incursions of anxiety in which the reality conjured by the signifier quakes, can never be conjured away. The order of social reality demands some figural repository for what the structural logic of its articulation is destined to foreclose, for the fracture that persistently haunts it as the death within itself. By refusing to identify with this death drive, by refuting the tropology that aligns us with this disidentification from the logic of futurity, those of us occupying the place of the queer can only, at best, displace that figural burden onto someone else; only by making the ethical choice of acceding to that position, only by assuming the truth of our queer capacity to figure the undoing of the symbolic and the subject of the symbolic can we undertake the impossible project of imagining an oppositional political position exempt from the repetitive necessity of reproducing the politics of the signifier—the politics aimed at eliminating the gap opened up by the signifier itself—which can only return us, by way of the child, to the politics of reproduction.

In Boston last year, Cardinal Bernard Law, mistaking, or perhaps understanding too well, the authority of identity bestowed by the signifier that constitutes his own name, declared his opposition to domestic benefits assuring the availability of health care to same-sex partners of municipal workers by offering us the following piece of rancid piety in the sky: "Society has a special interest in the protection, care and upbringing of children. Because marriage remains the principal, and the best, frame-

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work for the nurture, education and socialization of children, the state has a special interest in marriage" (Slattery 68). If Cardinal Law, by adducing this bitter concentrate of a governing futurism so fully invested in the figure of the child that it manages to justify refusing health care to the adults that those children become, if Cardinal Law can thus give voice to the mortifying mantra of a communal jouissance committed to the fetishization of the child at the expense of whatever it renders queer, then we must respond not only by insisting on our right to enjoy on an equal footing the various prerogatives of the social order, not only by avowing our capacity to confirm the integrity of the social order by demonstrating the selfless and enduring love we bestow on the partners we'd gladly fly to Hawaii in order to marry or on the children we'd as eagerly fly to China or Guatemala in order to adopt, but also by saying explicitly what Law and the law of the symbolic he represents hear, more clearly even than we do perhaps, in every public avowal of queer sexuality or identity: fuck the social order and the figural children paraded before us as its terroristic emblem; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Miz*; fuck the poor innocent kid on the 'Net; fuck Laws both with capital "l"s and with small; fuck the whole network of symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop.

Choosing to stand, as many of us do, outside the cycles of reproduction, choosing to stand, as we also do, by the side of those living and dying each day with the complications of AIDS, we know the deception of the societal lie that endlessly looks toward a future whose promise is always a day away. We can tell ourselves that with patience, with work, with generous contributions to lobbying groups, or generous participation in activist groups, or generous doses of political savvy and electoral sophistication, the future will hold a place for us—a place at the political table that won't have to come, as it were, at the cost of our place in the bed, or the bar, or the baths. But there are no *queers* in that future as there can be no future for queers. The future itself is kid stuff, reborn each day to postpone the encounter with the gap, the void, the emptiness, that gapes like a grave from within the lifeless mechanism of the signifier that animates the subject by spinning the gossamer web of the social reality within which that subject lives. If the fate of the queer is to figure the fate that cuts the thread of futurity, if the jouissance, the excess enjoyment, by which we are defined would destroy the other, fetishistic, identity-confirming jouissance through which the social order congeals around the rituals of its own reproduction, then the only oppositional status to which our queerness can properly lead us depends on our taking seriously the place of the death drive as which we figure and insisting, against the cult of the child and the political culture it supports, that we are not, to quote Guy Hocquenghem, "the signifier of what might become a new form of 'social organization'" (138), that we do not intend a new politics, a better society, a brighter future, since all of these fantasies reproduce the past, through displacement, in the form of the future by construing futurity itself as merely a form of reproduction. Instead we choose not to choose the child, as image of the imaginary past or as identificatory link to the symbolic future; we would bury the subject in the tomb that waits in the hollow of the signifier and pronounce at last the words we are condemned from the outset for having said anyway: that *we* are the advocates of abortion; that the child as

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figure of futurity must die; that we have seen the future and it's every bit as lethal as the past; and thus what is queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us, is our willingness to insist intransitively: to insist that the future stops here.

ENDNOTE

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