

Louis Suárez-Potts
luispo@mac.com

The Erotic Tactics of the Paraliterary

There is a wonderful scene in Delany's story, "Eric, Gwen, and D. H. Lawrence's Esthetic of Unrectified Feeling," from his collection of three, thematically linked stories, *Atlantis*, in which the young Sam Delany is taken along by his best friend, Robert, on a milk run by an exquisitely foul-mouthed milkman, the Eric of the title.

Both boys revel in the rough transgressive masculinity of the milk run, a transgressiveness marked by Eric's scabrous language and by the almost unstated acknowledgement that what is said during the ride is distinctly *not* for the ears of any parent, especially a mother. As might be expected, this implicit provision has the effect of making the whole thing a lot more fun. Sam considers that milk run--retrospectively, to be sure--but no less strongly for all that, to be "the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to me." And Robert, who is so sexually immature as to be blithely "immune" to Sam's more precocious attempts to initiate him into the circle of boys who silently and secretively "engaged in sexual carryings-on after swimming" nevertheless takes considerable pleasure in Eric's ribald company. If anything, Eric's language seem to do what Sam's actions failed to do (Robert expresses that Sam's gropings are "silly" and ticklish), that is, produce in the Robert the equivalent a kind of "genital joy."

Lest we begin to think of Eric as a pederast, I should add that Delany assures us that

“Eric did not have an iota of the child molester in him. . . . But if he had been so inclined, the sad and simple truth (at least I thought so then) is that I would have been the happiest, most willing, most gratefully molested child one might have asked for. There was simply no sexual act, whether or not I'd tried it already with the guys after swimming, I wouldn't have happily performed with him.

If for Robert the pleasure of the ride lies in the pure language--i.e., without a clear physical referent, and the genital joy is only metaphorical, for Sam, there is very much a physical referent excited by the language. Eric's language produces in him in a "profound trance, separated from the overtly sexual, at least in me, by a barrier no more substantial than a misty breath breathed out on a chill April dawn." Eric's language, which he will later describe as leaving him in and Robert in a "transgressive haze," causes Sam to ejaculate, though not with any particularly orgasmic pleasure: it's a purely physical thing.

In a story structured by scenes of aesthetic and sexual initiation, the milk run, textured by the touch of Eric's beautiful and obscene and wholly innocent language, provides a climax: of the aesthetic, and of the sexual, both folded into a delirious instance of language initiating the boys not so much into sex as into a pure aesthetic that is like sex but is more accurately unrectified feeling.

I want, in this paper, to examine the language of initiation in Delany's collection of stories, *Atlantis*, but also in several of his other works. But I should backtrack a little. My use of the term "initiation," which Delany employs without any special meaning, nevertheless derives its theoretical point from Michael Moon's usage of the same term in

his collection of essays, *A Small Boy and Others*. In this work, Moon examines the linked processes of imitation and initiation in queer American culture. Moon suggests that the pleasure derived from initiation—and then repeating the ritual—is

not about "one-time" experiences but about the restaging of fantasies and/or memories of or desires for "first-time" experiences, endlessly. Iterability is, of course, a crucial feature of imitation. Seeing repetition as a feature of [what gay S-M writer John Preston has called] "the theater of initiation" may help one begin to see how imitation and initiation are more closely related than they are ordinarily considered to be.

The repetition of the initiation becomes itself a source of pleasure, with the process of initiation and imitation intimately linked. The processes are linked, in that queered imitation (to quote Moon) enables queer initiation; mimesis conceives desire. In making such a claim, Moon employs Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen's powerful reading of the structure of desire in Freud, where he (Borch-Jacobsen) argues that imitation—mimesis—enables and even structures desire. "Desire is mimetic," Borch-Jacobsen writes, "before it is anything else," an assertion, that if we pause to think about it, suggests that desire is always something else, and incessantly "disoriented by mimesis."

Borch-Jacobsen is primarily interested in the deconstructing Freud and placing the Freudian tradition in context, as well as in more rigorously tracing the development of the infantile subject; his analysis, which can be thought of as a far more sophisticated Girardian analysis of desire, captures the logic by which the subject comes into being, not through desire, but through the "(dis)orienting" effects of mimesis. Mimesis, or as Moon

LSP

prefers, imitation, underwrites not just desire but identity, too. And, although Borch-Jacobsen focuses on the infant subject, the disorienting effect of mimesis on desire is never-ending and always a site of boundary anxiety. As Moon phrases it,

If in an important sense *no* desire is our own--that is, originates with us; if desire is indeed primarily induced by imitation, mimed and ventriloquized, then it is impossible to maintain our ordinary "orienting" notions of which desires we are at home with and which we are not.

The aesthetic--*mimesis*--in this formulation, becomes the vehicle for the disorientation of desire, and it becomes the mechanism by which the ordinary (what we are at home with) is presented as a site for anxiety and also promise because of how it places us with regard to it: as strangers.

In very abstract terms, this is what the uncanny is all about, the claim of the psychological on the aesthetic and the consequential problem of decoding the position of the subject under interrogation. The term, however, has its shortcomings. Yet for all its being overused and faddishly defined, the uncanny of Freud nevertheless plays the essential role of staging a confluence between the formal aesthetic and psychological to describe the disorienting effects of mimesis on our selves.

Of course Delany's "Eric, Gwen..." is not a particularly uncanny story; none of Delany's is. But it does share with the uncanny its entwined logic of mimetic disorientation, in which the "perverse" sits undecidably with the so-called "normal," and the reading of which depends, not just on the sophistication of the reader but on the degree to which the reader is able to comprehend the mimesis itself. That is, on the

LSP

subject position of the reader and his implication in the narrative.

To return to Delany's story, the articulated episodes of art and sex exemplify much of his fictional and memoir writing, in which narratives of art enable narratives of desire and produce narratives of mimetic identification. What is more, Eric's raw language includes the reader in the transgressive haze it produces in young Sam and, presumably, Robert. But for all its indisputably sexual force, and for all the clarity of its homosocial context, the language declines to specify a sexual valence or referent (i.e., how we define its effects on our bodies). It is instead a language of force not of identity; indeed, it effectively disarticulates any necessary claim to a specific and consequential identity.

Neither of the ten-year old boys fully understands what Eric is talking about. An utterance from Eric "'bout my face full of pussy... 'evoked," Delany tells us, "a picture of Eric . . . with a kitten trying to climb down from his head." The lack of details don't count; they get the gist of it; in fact, that arguably is part of the fun, for somehow, kittens are implicated in the sexual maëlstrom. And, anyway, "they couldn't stop laughing... as it all swirled around us in a phallic confusion, a surreally mis-imagined haze."

But, as I mentioned above, Sam does know enough to grab Eric's "swirling" talk and make it physically sexual. Robert cannot or does not. Sam understand the language through his body; Robert, lacking either the physiology or the knowledge to orient the pleasure he takes in Eric's company, leaves the language (or so we and Delany assume) unreferenced not just to homosexuality, but to any specific sexuality. For him, the experience is an unrectified and disarticulate swirl that he repeatedly enjoys and into which he was initiated his friend, Sam.

I want to focus on the scene that takes place in the art room run by the formalist artist Gwenny, when, some years after the milk run (but the same sexual month: April), Robert paints a picture that violates every formal aesthetic boundary:

Blues and reds and grays swirled around each other, the colors getting angrier and darker as he got closer to the center, where, in his energy, he'd already torn the paper once--and was *still* painting at it.

Gwenny happened by.... And made a sound as though she'd been hit.

Recovering herself, she let out a breath: "*Pure sex!*"

[Intrigued, Sam, after school, goes to see the painting.]

Robert--who . . . was still, on any scale I could read, the *least* sexual of children--had painted a picture in which no single shape, line, or color [the formalist triad] had retained its identity over an entire brush stroke. Rather it was all process, energy, movement... Was that, I wondered, what "pure sex" was? And how did the "pure" variety differ from the tentative, frightened, half-hidden (and presumably impure) sort I'd tried to sneak into paint years ago with my borrowed muscle-builder hulking on his borrowed throne in his borrowed, orientalized throne room?

We can, from our perspective--granted us by Delany--read the purity of the sex in Robert's painting as having to do with the transgressions of form: pure sex is about transgression. But the painting is more than about transgression. It *conveys* the erotic force of Eric's rough speech. In fact, the terms Delany uses to describe Robert's painting

LSP

echo the terms he uses to represent Eric's language; the word "swirl" speaks to both. More abstractly, the phallic intensity of the painting itself (with the brush penetrating the canvas in its force), reproduces the *physical* quality of Eric's wildly disorienting "phallic" confusion. To extrapolate, pure sex liberates—the artist from reference, from the obligation of form and color, and the viewer from nothing at all: Gwenny must exhale the intoxicating slam of blues and reds and grays that convey Robert's silently internalized sex. In contrast, the impurity of sex in Sam's homoerotic art has much less to do with the homoerotic component than with the fact that it refers to things and re-uses erotic images, fixing them in a banalized tableau. It does not liberate; rather, it captures the viewer in an exchange of identities *because* it is specifically mimetic.

All of which is hardly to suggest that Delany's works, and this one in particular, are banal; hardly. In so many of his works, Delany powerfully sets in motion an erotic swirl of charged exchanges—effectively that informs the reader and his avatars in texts such as *Dhalgren*, *Trouble on Triton*, and, of course, throughout the "Nevèryön" series of stories, to name but a few. The exchanges work for Gwenny and others who inhabit a particularly receptive subject position; who see in these texts something liberational. But this is the characteristic of the paraliterary, in which, under the wrap of a kind of uncanny *likeness*, threaded with the erotic, *things* can be said that otherwise can't be spoken of and they can be uttered as if in an echo chamber that robs the speaker of specific identity, ventriloquizes him, breeds new speakers to further the speech. We see this erotic tactic in texts as genteel as *The Turn of the Screw* and as raw as the slang of tramps. Unloosed, it does nothing. Claimed, it speaks identity.

LSP

At the story's end, Delany points out his own concern with a formalist aesthetic whose endpoint is the aestheticization of everything. Politically, as Benjamin, among others, has pointed out, it is problematical. "But that's the way the feeling world was presented, unrectified, to me. For better or worse, that's how it became mine." And it is how Delany has allowed it to become ours.