

# (Im)Personal Relationality in Alain Guiraudie's *Ici commence la nuit*

*As soon as persons are posited, the war begins*<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

- 1 In 2014, Alain Guiraudie published his first novel *Ici commence la nuit*<sup>2</sup> (Prix Sade) set in the Languedoc region of France, and acknowledged as the inspiration for his earlier award-winning film *L'inconnu du lac* (2013, "Queer Palm" at Cannes)<sup>3</sup>. Gilles Heurtebise, the main protagonist and narrator of Guiraudie's novel, is in the final days of his summer holidays, having spent the majority of the time cruising at the local lake. He has however formed an unusual friendship with a family in his local town. Events take a macabre twist when Gilles steals and dons a pair of male briefs from the family's clothesline. He ejaculates in the purloined briefs and returns them (damp) to the clothesline, in the mistaken belief he has not been seen. What ensues is a complex, fantastic investigation involving a sadistic police inspector, a romance between Gilles and Pépé (the ninety-eight-year-old man whose briefs Gilles has stolen), and a psychoanalytic tale in which the convoluted nature of events invites Gilles to question his homosexual lifestyle, in particular the promiscuous life he has led hitherto and whether he can ever commit to a monogamous relationship.
- 2 *Ici commence la nuit* is a timely intervention in two debates that preoccupy queer theorists today. Guiraudie writes against the perceived sexlessness of queer (theory) today and the accusations of abstraction, disembodiedness and institutionalisation levelled in its direction<sup>4</sup>. He writes also against queer's mainly dystopian trajectory exemplified particularly by the work of Lee Edelman. Edelman's uncompromising ethics of "No Future" intersect with other optimistic queer responses to the future, including Jack Halberstam's transformative value in the art of failure and the radical idealism of performance theory in the work of José Esteban Muñoz<sup>5</sup>. Guiraudie, I suggest, also has a stake in the future in the potential of literature as *fantasme* to reinvent the dynamics of queer desire. I will argue that Guiraudie's originality (literary primarily but also cinematic) resides in the way he returns the sex to queer with a view to traversing sex's dominant modalities of relationality, monogamy and narcissism. Via processes of cruising, self-renunciation (redemption) and asceticism, Guiraudie queers homosexual desire beyond sex, the person and the body gesturing to a sustainability of homosexual desire as future/infinite life. Methodologically, I propose to situate Guiraudie's text within a specific queer trajectory that draws on the work of one of the early architects of queer theory, Leo Bersani, and his concept of impersonal relationality. Impersonal relationality is the dissolution and dispersal of the self in favour of a "universal relatedness grounded in the absence of relations, in the felicitous erasure of people as persons" (*I* 38)<sup>6</sup>. I will also consider three aspects of Lacanian *jouissance*: *jouissance* as lack (castration); *jouissance féminine* (*jouissance* as Other) which draws on Lacan's axiom "il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel"; and *jouissance* as *lalangue*, the Lacanian motor of the unconscious. I will demonstrate how Gilles's homosexuality engages a wider queer polemic in which resistance to

personalised constructions of the self and *jouissance* exposes the possibility of relational existence as an alternative authenticating paradigm founded in what Bersani calls “impersonal relationality”. In a related way, I want to show how Guiraudie reconnects his reader with the *raw* processes of queer desire, its *modus operandi*, unconscious motivations, and a renewed optimism in the face of the negativity that characterises queer theory today<sup>7</sup>. For reasons of space, and in order to evaluate the theoretical depth and range of Guiraudie’s vision, this study is limited to his novel. However the overlaps between novel and film are significant and my analysis may be of interest to specialists of film theory/philosophy.

### Impersonal Relationality<sup>8</sup>

- 3 Impersonal relationality accounts for part of the libidinal drive that defines Gilles Heurtebise. This drive is founded on what Bersani calls the “shattering of sex” – sexuality’s capacity to shatter personalised sexual relations into a depersonalised and deindividuated (non-) relationality.

I have been proposing that we think of the sexual – more specifically, of *jouissance* in sexuality – as a defeat of power, a giving up, on the part of an otherwise hyperbolically self-affirming and phallogcentrically constituted ego, of its projects of mastery. Thus the subject enters into a Bataille-like *communication* with otherness, one in which the individuating boundaries that separate subjects [...] are erased. (IRG 109)

- 4 Gilles’s lifestyle, multiple nameless lovers and cruising activities are symptomatic of this shattering. Shattering is associated primarily with the topology of open spaces (crowds and the lakeside). In the first lake scene, the names and faces of gay others are erased: “les inconnus” appear from behind trees masturbating while “looking” at Gilles. The street too provides an opportunity to “croiser les regards” (ICN 108). Cruising and its mode of operating is also a way for Guiraudie to explore the impact of the shattering of self and sex. In one of the later lake scenes after Thibault Lombard’s murder, Gilles is questioned by the police inspector. The scene pivots on the subversion of heteronormative assumptions of cruising. The inspector is suspicious that, given the amount of time Gilles spends cruising, he is unable to provide names, phone numbers or details of other cruisers to assist in the investigation. Further confusing the inspector, Gilles is unmoved by the death of the local gay man in a locale so familiar to him. Undermining the assumption of a close-knit gay community, Guiraudie gestures to another type of gay fraternity founded in impersonality and the sociality of sex.

Cruising, like sociality, can be a training in impersonal intimacy [...]. In cruising, we leave our selves behind [...]. Otherness, unlocatable within differences that can be known and enumerated, is made concrete in the eroticised touching of a body without attributes. A nonmasochistic *jouissance* [...] is the sign of nameless, identity-free contact – contact with an object I don’t know and certainly don’t love and which has, unknowingly, agreed to be momentarily the incarnated shock of otherness. In that moment we relate to that which transcends all relations. (IRG 61)

- 5 Gilles’s relationship with his new family reinforces the sociality of the impersonal. It begins with his feeling at ease in their home, despite the fact he has never met them before. Even the horrific events of the police inspector’s sadistic torture of Gilles in the bathroom does not result in recrimination; in fact the family gather

afterwards to toast Gilles's "release". Having nothing in common with this family is the reason for Gilles's affinity with them. Guiraudie uses Gilles's assimilation within the family unit to subvert norms of sibling loyalty, rivalry and friendship, and explore impersonal forms of relationality: "Je leur parlais de ma vie mais pas trop non plus et ils prenaient ce que je leur disais sans chercher à en savoir plus" (ICN 45). In the absence of any shared past or mutual curiosity, Guiraudie creates an alternative relational structure in which Gilles as adopted son confounds Oedipal norms by forming a sexual liaison with the grandfather (Pépé), and resisting the advances of daughter Cindy and mother Mariette. Gilles's entrance into this exotic surrogate structure shatters personalised and normative sexual relations, so much so that the ease he feels in their company is measured by his ability to masturbate without fear or distraction: "Tellement je me sentais de mieux en mieux dans cette maison [...], j'ai commencé à me branler chez eux [...]. *Sans désir* pour Pépé ou Mariette [...]. Juste pour la chaleur de leur accueil, j'avais trouvé mon havre de paix" (ICN 45-6) [my emphasis]. Gilles's undirected masturbation is the expression of a potentially beneficial confusion about (sexual) modes of connectedness, a "reconfiguring of the relational [...]" that can help us elaborate modes of being-in-the-world to which the concept of identity itself might be irrelevant" (IRG 87). Relational being for Bersani is not determined by self or identity but by "de-realised being" (I 28) as being never more than potential being. The quixotic nature of this "familial" context opens out these potentialities.

- 6 We can continue our analysis of impersonal relationality from a psychoanalytic perspective through Guiraudie's use of erotic objects, notably male briefs and pyjamas. Lacan's affirmation in the 1970s that "il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel"<sup>9</sup> signalled a shift in the psychoanalysis of human sexual relations. Overturning Freudian foundations of the Oedipal complex, Lacan claimed that there was no sexual formula for sexual attraction between human beings for the reason that sexual difference is not a concept. *Jouissance* for Lacan is not just limitless but it is symptomatic of an original lack of *jouissance* that is presumed to be only possible in a future Other. This theory of *jouissance* would in part help explain Gilles's pursuit of sexual pleasure, including his repetitive and frustrating cruising activities. But Lacan also explores the consequences of this unending pursuit of sexual pleasure, in particular the mechanisms of displacement in the absence of a (normative) "rapport sexuel". Lacan highlights two important interconnecting features in this regard; the *asymmetrical* nature of the relation between Man and Woman signifies that the sexual drive is directed not to a whole person but to part-objects (a surplus *jouissance* or "plus-de-jouir")<sup>10</sup>. In other words, a sexual relation is established between a subject and a (partial) object (for Gilles, Pépé's briefs and pyjamas). Lacan refers to this object as *objet a* and it has a dual function of occupying the place of an original missing *jouissance* (but also a missing Other/partner), and of producing what he calls a matheme of fantasy (*SOa*). The other (Pépé) does not exist for Gilles as a real subject but as a fantasy object and the cause of his desire.
- 7 Lacan's theory of *jouissance* extends our argument on impersonal relationality<sup>11</sup>. In his self-defence of the theft of the briefs, Gilles admits that his sexual drive "est plus fort que moi" (ICN 9). However, few characters understand or are willing to accept this; Cindy tries to convert him to heterosexuality by insisting that fellatio from her will prove that he can change his sexual preference. Pépé's only way of computing

Gilles's masturbation in his briefs is to connect the act directly to himself. None of these interpretations address the possibility of the occlusion of the object of desire as both subject and totality. *Jouissance* raises the relational stakes therefore on two levels. Firstly, it reinforces Bersani's idea of the shattering of sex and sexuality's capacity to depersonalise sexual relations, whilst at the same time redistributing sexual desire elsewhere. Secondly, as the embodiment of this impersonal relationality, Gilles is confronted by attempts to rationalise his behaviour. These attempts coalesce around the figure of the police inspector who sends the soiled briefs for sperm analysis in order to identify the culprit via DNA. Proof and facts are the watchwords of the inspector and they appear to drive the police enquiry. However, as events unfold (withhold) it is clear Guiraudie is using their convoluted twists to expose the identity-focused direction of the investigation, particularly in the use of illicit practices. We discover that the investigation has no sanctioned limits because discipline and punish take place outside the law in a graphic scene of police torture; in the locked family bathroom, the inspector ties Gilles to a chair and forces P  p  s excrement-sodden briefs up his rectum. Notwithstanding the extreme and graphic sadomasochism of this scene, there is also an implicit attempt by the inspector to rationalise Gilles's *jouissance* by forcing him to not only re-ingest his *jouissance* as punishment but also force its re-ingestion as a category of self (hood)<sup>12</sup>.

- 8 Briefs signify diverse responses to impersonal relationality. Gilles and the police inspector use them to different effect. Gilles steals P  p  s briefs and masturbates in them not out of desire for a person in particular (not even P  p  ) but because of the sensual thrill he feels. He insists "il n'y a rien de sexuel entre nous" (*ICN* 84). Gilles's impersonal authenticity is in stark contrast to the inspector's obsessive attempt to ascribe ownership to the briefs, leading him to use briefs as instruments of punishment, psychological torture and seduction. As a result, the inspector misunderstands Gilles's anonymisation of the briefs by seeing them as expressions of sexual desire for someone in particular. This view distorts the inspector's relation to the investigation and to Gilles, to the extent that when he and Gilles become sexually involved the inspector misinterprets Gilles's briefs to signify his desire (and love) for him. This misuse translates into a destructive *jouissance* to control and dominate. On one level, we can read the inspector's intentions as a way of explaining Gilles's desire in terms of categorisations (gerontophilia in this case). On another, the inspector tries to rationalise Gilles's desire; if the briefs Gilles masturbates in could belong to anyone, why doesn't he just go to the local market, buy a pair of briefs and masturbate in them? The question again belies a misunderstanding of Gilles's impersonal relationality. Far from anonymous, the two people from whom Gilles has stolen briefs in the past (P  p   and his former teacher M. Escandoli  res) are two persons he has already met and felt an instinctive sensual attraction towards. However, they are not close friends or partners either. They are part of what Bersani calls a wider (sexual) sociability: "In cruising, I'm proposing another sexual model – one in which a deliberate avoidance of relationships might be crucial in initiating, or at least clearing the ground for, a new relationality" (*IRG* 59). The critical point is that Gilles is not interested in a relationship with either, and is merely signalling his *jouissance* differently (by leaving sperm in their underwear in the same way an insect might lay a silk road in its love garden). By contrast, wearing Gilles's *red* briefs (colour>owner

identification) and later depositing them sperm-soaked on the door knob of Gilles's apartment, the inspector is attributing in a transparent and (mis)calculated way his desire for a specific other (Gilles). Instead of arousing Gilles's interest, the inspector's misguided actions of mimicry (imitating Gilles's initial theft of briefs from the clothesline as a sign of mutual rapprochement) instill in Gilles fear and neurosis<sup>13</sup>.

### Personal Relationality

- 9 Guiraudie views *jouissance* as a way of connecting people differently. Through *jouissance* and sexuality people who are unknown to each other get closer. Set against and inside the archetype of an eccentric family, Guiraudie establishes *jouissance* as an authentic and sustainable register of impersonal relationality. By contrast, the police inspector is ubiquitous as an enforcer of personal relationality through his invocation of state law and the law of desire. His official influence is such that all Gilles's movements in and around the town and in P  p  's house are subject to his oversight and command; the novel's oneiric peregrinations mean that even in his absence, his presence is pervasive. However, when the inspector seduces Gilles and they end up sharing an apartment together, Gilles begins to question his hitherto dissolute lifestyle. It is a key stage in Guiraudie's progressive mapping of Gilles's homosexuality, which started with the visits to P  p   in his bed. Their encounters (all in or on P  p  's bed) set in train a number of exchanges and interactions that cause Gilles to rethink his sexual history and Guiraudie to refine the dynamic between impersonal and personal relationality. Initially, Gilles manages to control his emotions and actions vis-  -vis P  p  . P  p   has been aware from as early as the theft of his briefs that Gilles had masturbated in them, and this prompts a series of important questions: "Tu te branlais dans mon slip,    deux pas de moi, mais *tu pensais    moi?*" (ICN 55); "*C'est moi qui te fais bander comme   a?*" (ICN 101) [my emphases]. Gilles confesses to masturbating but not to thinking of P  p  : "J'aime   tre avec toi [...]. Mais j'ai pas envie de toi" (ICN 55). Guiraudie qualifies further: Gilles takes pleasure in "dormir avec" P  p   (quite distinct from "coucher avec") but asks himself why he does it and is lost for what to do after sleeping with P  p  , the assumption being that *sleeping with* invokes a relational continuity in the form of a bedside chat or postcoital smoke. Gilles is "content dans l'intimit   de P  p  " but refrains from kissing him despite the intensity of his feelings. Gilles sleeps in P  p  's pyjamas, intoxicated by their odour and the texture of their material, but it is an intimacy at one remove, via *objet a*. This second "non-libidinal" drive (located in the "personal", the gerontic and a courtly idealism) not only causes much soul-searching for Gilles but also challenges the sociability and impersonality of sexual desire that has shaped his life up to this point.
- 10 P  p   is surprised that someone so young might feel sexually attracted to him. He has internalised this attraction as physical and sexual. He waits to be seduced by Gilles. Like the police inspector, P  p   wants to attribute his stolen briefs to the arousal of a specific other (Gilles). As Gilles and P  p   see more of each other, they become closer, but the prospect of sexual contact between them becomes more distant. Their affective proximity is bridged by the sexual distance from one another. Despite wanting to see him as much as possible, the more time Gilles spends away from P  p   the more intense his feelings towards him become, and less

the desire for sexual gratification. What is at stake in this reciprocal process is that it is not the case that Gilles is not aroused by the body or person of P  p  . It is more the case, as we have argued, that Gilles's *jouissance* is channelled through an object that stands in for the subject. It is also the case that in the process of Lacanian object/subject replacement the gap between the object and the subject has grown wider to the point that Gilles's relation with P  p   is more a preoccupation of the mind than of the body. *Jouissance* has migrated from a fixation on briefs (*objet a*) to the subject P  p   and then to the idea of the person. Gilles has thus far resisted attempts by P  p   and the police inspector to personalise his impersonal relationality but the major consequence of this is that resistance to sexual contact has been displaced to the mind. Guiraudie, I suggest, uses this displacement to explore another dimension to Gilles's homosexuality: "Penser    P  p   sereinement, sans image dans la t  te, juste    l'id  e de P  p  , il est l  , dans mon c  ur, il me manque, on se reverra bient  t [...]. J'aime   a" (*ICN* 108) [my emphasis]. The emergence of the idea of the person has a Platonic root in Plato's theory of forms (ideas) in which nonphysical forms represent the most accurate reality, as opposed to Aristotelian empiricism that situates the thing/object in the here and now. We can read the debate between the impersonal and the personal as a dialogue between form and empiricism. According to Plato (as expounded in the *Republic* and *Phaedo*) forms are the essences of objects/humans with aspatial and atemporal associations. I suggest that Guiraudie invokes this theory of the idea of P  p   to reinforce the impersonal relationality thesis and act as a buffer against over-personalisation. It gestures too to the novel's optimistic conclusion where the idea of love in its Platonic meaning persists transcendent to time and life. Also, as I will discuss now, the *idea* of P  p   underpins a chivalric code embodied in the way *amour courtois* frames the homosexual relationality between Gilles and P  p   in the later stages of the novel.

- 11 Personal relationality in Guiraudie's novel is founded not on relational being in the way Bersani articulates it as a sociability of sex. It signifies instead a return to an idealisation of the personal/other. However this does not imply a return to a *personalised* personal (as in the clinginess personified by the police inspector who settles in with Gilles, or indeed P  p   as a Lacanian subject of desire) but a return to the person as Idea. "L'id  e de P  p  " sustains Gilles in his *jouissance* of the other and this *jouissance* is rehearsed through a series of tropes deployed by Guiraudie. The first of these is the way Guiraudie invokes and subverts the heteroised tradition of *amour courtois* and Occitan to facilitate Gilles's re-homosexualisation in love<sup>14</sup> – a decategorisation of homosexual identity which in turn "frees love from the demand of the person" (*I* 28). *Amour courtois* was a discipline of idolisation<sup>15</sup>. Accordingly, the lover (P  p   as *demoiselle*) would traditionally accept the independence of the suitor (Gilles as *pr  tendant*). Their respective geospatial differences would support this negotiated freedom of movement (one confined to bed, the other constantly on the move). The suitor would also attempt to make himself worthy of his lover by acting honourably and by doing whatever the other would require, subjecting himself to a series of tasks and deeds to prove his love and commitment. Sexual *satisfaction* would often give way to sexual *attraction* as the focal point of the encounter. There are aspects of this chivalric structure in this novel. However, I would argue that Guiraudie queers *amour courtois* via a re-imagining of its codes and gestures. This queering via gestures draws on the

performance theory elaborated by Muñoz in the context of theatre, drag and dance in *Cruising Utopia*, and also by Juana María Rodríguez in her recent work in which she states: “Gesture functions as a socially legible and highly codified form of kinetic communication, and as cultural practice that is differentially manifested through particular forms of embodiment”<sup>16</sup>. Guiraudie draws on Pépé’s age, his life of unrequited love, his courtly register and most effectively his use of Occitan in exchanges with Gilles to flesh out another way of rethinking relationality and *jouissance*. Courtly love becomes an opportunity for Gilles to explore the mind of Pépé; how he thinks and communicates, indirectly and by sign, the discrete contours and gestures of his queer desire, and also how this interaction can lead to a deeper understanding of his own homosexuality in terms of the enriching practices of care and friendship (outside of sexual consummation) that he displays at the end of the novel. *Amour courtois* also points to the Platonic idea of a mutual understanding of knowledges between two sets of thoughts and positionings (as opposed to two persons). Bersani too contrasts knowledge manifest in the individual subject (driven by *jouissance*) with knowledge as unconscious that is realised not in desire but in what he calls “talk”: “This talk is the only imaginable form of a non-destructive *jouissance*, the *jouissance* of giving and receiving, through embodied language, the subjecthood of others” (I 29).

- 12 Knowledge as unconscious talk is “expressed” in Occitan. Occitan is spoken at different moments in the novel and to different levels of fluency by different characters. A female police officer greets Gilles in Occitan, after noticing a novel (Enric Mouly’s celebrated novel *E la barta Floriguet*) that Gilles has on his coffee table but has not finished reading. Gilles speaks “passable” Occitan but understands it better than he speaks it. Pépé is the most accomplished conversant in Occitan, an ability Mariette and Cindy view as a sign of his senility and madness. On one level, Occitan is peripheral – a splash of regional colour. On another it is central to the novel’s *jouis-sens*<sup>17</sup>. The first time Occitan is used is when Pépé replies to Gilles when they first meet. Pépé uses the word “soscar” to describe his distracted state of mind. The word literally translates as “lost in thought”, indicative of Pépé’s age-related confusion and also a deeper sexual and ontological con(in)version in progress. The frequency of Occitan use increases the more they meet, and in the course of exchanges changes to our analysis ensue. When Pépé asks in Occitan if Gilles was thinking of him when he masturbated in his briefs, Gilles replies “Peut-être” in Occitan, only to confirm a few moments later “Non” in French (ICN 104). Gilles is not fluent in Occitan but he is clearly deeply moved when Pépé speaks to him in this language. Indeed Gilles is disappointed when Pépé reverts to French. Critical to these early exchanges in Occitan is the way in which Pépé and Gilles communicate their emotions in what appears like a secret tongue (unconscious knowledge) or what Lacan calls *lalangue* (unconscious *jouissance*). Not only do we detect a greater degree of honesty and authenticity when they communicate in Occitan but the language deployed by Pépé in particular is evocative of another time, place and state (of mind). Occitan is his mother tongue, the “langue de son enfance” (ICN 136). He pines for Gilles in Occitan: “je me languis de toi” (ICN 104, French translations in footnotes). The touching of hands (“il n’a pas envie de plus que ça [...]. Juste la main [...]. La main dans la main [...], j’en bande presque” (ICN 190)) is not only an instinctive pleasure in each other’s company but also a noble, depersonalised *self*-restraint that eschews the requisite

indulgence of a sexual dénouement.

- 13 This courtliness is also embodied in one of Gilles's former lovers. Paul wanted to live with Gilles but when Gilles refused Paul committed suicide. Reflections on Paul give way to the third in a series of dream sequences in which Gilles meets Paul by a river and during the conversation in Occitan Paul criticises Gilles for his promiscuity. Paul also insists on his desire to be with one man (not a ghost) "en chair et en os" (*ICN* 234). Gilles replies by saying that ghosts can become "de chair et d'os". This oneiric exchange builds on the novel's wider trajectories in a number of ways. It sets Gilles's impersonal relationality against Paul's monogamous fidelity. The references to ghosts and flesh/bones presage Gilles's future self-transformation through *self*-renunciation, and frame the externalisation of *jouissance* as *lalangue*. The fact that this transformation is also expressed in the "dead" language of Occitan brings to life the significance of Occitan as the Real expression of the unconscious (*lalangue*), as well as the traditions and knowledges synonymous with *amour courtois*. The importance of speaking a dead language is heightened when, after Paul's cremation, Gilles returns to his apartment to find the police inspector reading Enric Mouly's novel. It is another key moment in our understanding of Gilles's *self*-renunciation. In response to questions from the inspector about why one would continue to speak a dead language like Occitan, Gilles engages in a cultural defence of the past. Not only is Occitan the language of his parents but Gilles argues that language needs a "peuple" to make it survive. He insists that studying and reading Occitan is a way of sharing a culture and connecting with a style of living and thinking<sup>8</sup>. The subtext comes to light when the inspector asks if it is this style of thinking that has attracted him to Pépé, to which Gilles replies: "Oui, Pépé me touche plus en occitan" (*ICN* 259). The response alienates the inspector for a number of reasons we now appreciate. It separates him from Gilles (a potential lover); it casts the inspector as uncultured and jealous; it reinforces the linguistic, cultural and subliminal bond between Gilles and Pépé; and significantly it highlights the powerlessness of the inspector who may be able to impose his will on Gilles but he cannot prevent a dead language (love) from being spoken, however inadequately. By the same token, knowledge of Occitan, a metaphor for the unconscious *lalangue* of *jouissance*, cuts through the apparent coherent system of the French language – textually, juridically, institutionally – in order to highlight the inconsistencies and misuses that undermine its speakers and their ideas in the novel.
- 14 The cultural and sexual politics of speaking a dead language also draw our attention to a number of issues that inflate Gilles's homosexual stock in the novel and position him as a figure of queer positivity. The desirous relation between Gilles and Pépé is never concretised in terms of "homosexual". Their desire for each other goes *without saying*. By the end of the novel, Gilles is pressured by others for reasons of honesty and transparency to reveal (verbalise) his homosexuality to Pépé. Pépé is unphased by the revelation. His only comment is to ask why he is telling him this now – signifying that their desire for each other has already been embedded within the *lalangue* of *jouissance* and the idiolect of *amour courtois*, and therefore not in need of saying (and especially not in Occitan). Significantly, Gilles "outs" himself in French; to do so in Occitan, as he says, "serait ridicule" (*ICN* 189). The distinction is salient. Public disclosure of homosexuality is commonplace today. The word *gay* is part of the global lexicon and through it are



siphoned categorisations of personhood and identity that Bersani's theory of relational being would rebuke. On the one hand, in confessing his homosexuality in French, Gilles submits partially to this identarian orthodoxy, although he admits being pressurised into doing so. On the other hand, stating that it would be ridiculous to use Occitan to confirm his sexuality, he is championing Occitan as the free *lalangue* of indiscriminate *jouissance*, liberated from the conscious and discursive formations of gender and identity. Occitan as *lalangue* gestures in the direction of Bersani's concept of "homo-ness" and Plato's theory of forms, both experienced as a communication not among persons but as Bersani says "of forms, as a kind of universal solidarity not of identities but of positionings and configurations in space, a solidarity that ignores even the apparently most intractable identity-difference" (*IRG* 44). The dead language of Occitan reframes this non-intimate relationality, rehabilitating the depersonalised personal in a wider courtly context of love and eternity: "une idylle amoureuse sans sexe, un désir qui se concrétiserait ailleurs que dans le cul, qui se concrétiserait d'ailleurs pas, et qui du coup s'éteindrait jamais. Un désir éternel" (*ICN* 140). In contrast to the destructive *jouissance* of the police inspector, Gilles's previous libertine lifestyle with its promise of sexual gratification, and the dominant narrative of queer negativity, Guiraudie's novel would appear to point to alternative ways of sustaining homosexual desire (love) through a post-desire relationality in which there is no longer the need to appropriate the other's desire. Bersani refers to this as "the new ascetic pleasure of all-inclusive impersonal relationality" (*I* 29).

15 Gilles's (and Guiraudie's) defence of Occitan also reflects a concern for the transmission and preservation of culture and art, a historical perspective on the role of cultural heritage, intergenerational awareness, a duty of care for the past and a courageous resistance against attempts to undermine it. This resistance shores up the idea of culture being preserved and sustained through speech acts (and not institutions) which in turn reinforce the wider import to be attached to Gilles's *queer* relation with Pépé. For Guiraudie, it is clearly of cultural and political importance that the tradition of *amour courtois* and its values of honesty, truth and respect are not only preserved but reinvented, embodied and transmitted by a narrative featuring "homosexuals" as the main actors. In the same vein, speaking and in the process queering a dead language enables Guiraudie to explore an alternative discourse to the corrosive *jouissance* of a "No Future" queer theory. Against the backdrop of a corrupt gendarmerie that is vindictive towards those who seek to preserve such traditions and jealous of those who incarnate it, Gilles emerges as a Lazarus figure of "redemption" (in Bersani's sense of the word)<sup>19</sup>; Pépé and Occitan pave the way for a compassionate homosexuality and a chance for Gilles to redeem himself outside of *self*-hyperbole. In the tradition of courtliness, it is an opportunity to put the sexual to one side and take pleasure in performing tasks that bestow esteem on him and Pépé.

16 Where Guiraudie's novel challenges Edelman's ethics of queer negativity is in the idea of the future. For Edelman, the future is defined in terms of a "reproductive futurism" that privileges heteronormativity (*NF* 2). Edelman's "queerness" however (which protects the *sinthomosexual* from futurism's Symbolic order) is restricted by its "structural position" defined by the death drive. With no future beyond the pure *jouissance* attached to this act of repudiation, Edelman's queerness nullifies use-value, moral judgment and emotional engagement. I maintain that queerness

in Guiraudie's work is not locked into a structure or identity but drifts as a sexuality – an act of being or becoming in Bersani's terminology – with the capacity to radicalise the Symbolic and also transform itself. The final deathbed scene, conducted in *fluent* Occitan, encapsulates this transformative potential through the competing impersonal and personal trajectories of Gilles's homosexual history. The scene merges the undeniable forces that have generated his impersonal relationality with the new devotion and commitment Pépé has inspired. Impersonal narcissism (Bersani's counterpoint to impersonal relationality) returns briefly and graphically in the figure of the police inspector to rape and castrate Gilles, and in the process reignite in Gilles feelings of sexual promiscuity: “je peux pas dormir dans les bras d'un seul homme, j'ai toujours besoin d'un troisième et je me demande quand est-ce que tout ça finira, que je puisse enfin dormir tranquille” (ICN 283). But this return is overshadowed by Gilles's self-transformation. With Pépé dying in the bed beside him, Gilles nurses him, cleaning the excrement from his rectum<sup>20</sup>. He also pleasures him with his fingers but stops short of anal penetration. Penetration and ejaculation (the sexual climax being once all he ever lived for) are replaced by a negotiated suspension of a sexual endpoint to his *jouissance*. In the image of “reste à bander” (with Gilles's erect cock perched permanently against the arse of Pépé – similar in epistemic significance to Bersani's use of Genet's “figure de proue” in *Homos*<sup>21</sup>) – Guiraudie extends Gilles's homosexual and desiring timeline. In this image, Gilles discovers a different sexual intensity beyond sex (a “grande vérité”) in the naked company of Pépé and their mutual “caresse”.

- 17 In suspending anal penetration and Gilles's *jouissance* as orgasm, Guiraudie transfers Gilles's sexual desire beyond the demands of its immediacy and personalisation to a desire that is sustained after the moment, after death and for eternity. This survival of queer desire as eternal beyond self, castration and death is a clear challenge to the fatal finitude that typifies the queer ethics of death advocated by Edelman, for whom the “*sinthomosexual*” is predetermined by a radical selflessness and unliveable desire “that has its discourse of intelligibility as its own promising fatality [...], the ethical task for which queers have been singled out” (NF 101). Guiraudie's novel defies this queer ethic. The renunciation of *jouissance*, represented by Gilles's castration, is the apotheosis of his self-transformation. As the culmination of the shattering of sex, his impersonal relationality is eternalised through his castration – the supreme (symbolic) act, according to Bersani, of *self*-dismissal as sex in favour of the *sexual* as a “model of ascesis” (I 97), aspects of which we see played out in Gilles's self-sacrifice and self-renunciation for Pépé. Guiraudie elevates Gilles beyond the category of self to take a higher moral position as “a universal loved object of sacrifice” (I 96) and a hero in the true sense of the *amour courtois* novel. Alain Badiou echoes Bersani's model of ascetic desire in his theory of love developed from Lacan. Love, for Badiou, fills in the absence of Lacan's “pas de rapport sexuel”. Whilst *jouissance* remains asymmetrical in Lacan, Badiou's theory of love privileges the difference of the other (the impersonal) over the identity of the one (the personal). In this, Bersani and Badiou challenge preconceptions of fidelity (to a person), exalting instead the universal and eternal: “L'amour [...] s'adresse à *l'être* même de l'autre, à l'être tel qu'il a surgi, tout armé de son être”<sup>22</sup>. The life of Pépé has changed Gilles's homosexuality. Pépé's death has transfigured it: “Je laisse ma tête aller contre la

poitrine de Pépé. J'ai encore envie de lui [...]. J'ai envie de rester avec lui tout le temps [...]. Ça y est, je le tiens mon désir éternel" (*ICN* 285).

## Conclusion

18 *Ici commence la nuit* belongs to a tradition of queer thinking on (non-) relationality that dates back to Hocquenghem and Foucault and which continues to shape the "queer world-making"<sup>23</sup> of Edelman, Halberstam and Muñoz. Intrinsic to this tradition has been the understanding of (non) relationality as an ethical choice. Invoking an important theoretical and ontological position developed and enriched by the work of Leo Bersani, Guiraudie's novel (and its cinematic adaptation) reminds us of the link between sexuality and being. Promiscuity, fetishism and *jouissance* are not the passive manifestations of an inexplicable unconscious nor are they defined by their difference from a heteronormative ontological order. On the contrary, Gilles Heurtebise's homosexuality discloses a coherent ontology of being founded in the disavowal of categories of sex and self. Disavowal displays numerous guises from impersonal and depersonalised relationality to the detours created by the *objet a*. Critically, disavowal is not mere stylistic digression but, as Bersani claims, has a persistent ethical "swerve"<sup>24</sup> that we can map across Guiraudie's text as it deflects Oedipal, reproductive and sexual norms. It's a swerve that finds its redemption in the ascetic *jouissance* of castration and self-disinvestment. Guiraudie's contribution to queer writing and thought is distinct in this respect. On one level, the *récit fantasque* (incorporating fabulous intrigue, subliminal desire and queer courtliness) enables Guiraudie to do away with realism and explore a wider queer eternal as a new mode of aesthetic radicalism (à la Muñoz and Halberstam) that can release queer politics and theory from its current dystopian grip. On another, whilst a queer eternal may appear to gesture "negatively" to a future in the finitude of castration and death, it is precisely in this finitude that Guiraudie exacts the transformative and (non-) relational power of ascesis<sup>25</sup>. In castration Gilles's love is immortalised: "It is as if love were *pure* once the subject absents himself from it, once this love without a subject is settled on its object and is itself absorbed into its object" (*I* 53).

Enda McCaffrey  
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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Leo Bersani, Adam Phillips, *Intimacies*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2010, p. 25, henceforth *I*.
- <sup>2</sup> Alain Guiraudie, *Ici commence la nuit*, Paris, P.O.L, 2014, henceforth *ICN*.
- <sup>3</sup> Alain Guiraudie, *L'inconnu du lac*, 2013 (DVD).
- <sup>4</sup> The de-eroticisation of queer theory was the subject of an academic spat between Tim Dean and Lee Edelman in successive issues of the academic journal *American Literary History* in 2015. This spat has history. Hélène Bourcier raised concerns about the inability of queer theory to "take account of the materiality of speech, language and the reality of queer lives" (Hélène Bourcier, "F\*\*\* the Politics of Disempowerment in the Second Butler", Special Issue on "Queer Theory's Return to France", *Paragraph* (eds) Oliver Davis and Hector Kollias, 35, no. 2, 2012, p. 238). François Cusset challenged queer theory's "use-value", by which he meant its sociopolitical utility or "call to life" (François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p. 335). I do not intend to explore this "call to life" in Cusset's political sense nor in Puar's sense of a "turn to life" as biopolitical social order (Jasbir Puar,

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- Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Duke University Press, 2007, p. 4-5). What I want to explore in Guiraudie is his resistance to this “call to life” of the biopolitical. Queerness in Guiraudie questions this cathexis to death by transfiguring where death lives.
- 5 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Duke University Press, 2004, henceforth *NF*; José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York, NYU Press, 2009; Judith (Jack) Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2011.
  - 6 Relational being in Bersani is also an ontology. Bersani shares this with Alain Badiou's theory of love as a transition from pure singularity to a “valeur universelle” (Alain Badiou, *Éloge de l'amour*, Paris, Flammarion, 2009, p. 22).
  - 7 For a positive response to the negative ethics of death see Tim Dean, “Mediated Intimacies: Raw Sex, *Truvada*, and the Biopolitics of Chemoprophylaxis”, *Sexualities*, 18, 2015, p. 224-246.
  - 8 Impersonal relationality (the antisocial thesis) is the idea that sexuality can undo selfhood and social relations. It can be traced to the final paragraph of Bersani's “Is the Rectum a Grave?”: “If sexuality is socially dysfunctional in that it brings people together only to plunge them into a self-shattering and solipsistic *jouissance* that drives them apart, it could also be thought of as our primary hygienic practice of nonviolence” (Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2009, p. 30, henceforth *IRG*).
  - 9 Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire. Livre XX. Encore, 1972-73*. Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1975, p. 17.
  - 10 For the Marquis de Sade, the most intense sadistic sexuality depended on symmetry; crime against another version of oneself (man on man or boy) was seen to double the pleasure. In sex with women, men enjoyed a diminished pleasure of asymmetrical sex. Lacan bypasses asymmetry through the *objet a*.
  - 11 Homosexuality for Lacan is a perverse *structure* because it infringes on the normative requirements of the Oedipus complex. I read homosexuality in part through Lacanian *jouissance féminine* in which the central asymmetry is located not in a Woman Other but in the *stand-in (objet a)* for the Other.
  - 12 Self and sex are, for Bersani, the key problematics. Sex is self-hyperbole. Bersani views the self as a sanction for violence (a value to kill in order to protect itself). We see this violence of the self in the murderous actions of the police inspector.
  - 13 There are similarities between the police inspector's behaviour and that of a libertine in the novels of Sade. The libertine's most intense *jouissance* comes from a murderous relation with a being like himself (another male). It is the phenomenon of suicidal symmetry. The police inspector embodies this symmetry. Bersani adds: “The larger point in Sade [...] has to do with the use of violence in order, quite literally, to make the victim give birth to sexuality in the torturer [...]. Slaves are killed so that the masters may, as it were, appropriate their suffering as their own sexuality” (Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, “Merde alors”, *Substance*, 13, 1980, p. 22-35).
  - 14 Alain Badiou, *Éloge de l'amour*, *op. cit.*, p. 28-30; Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies*, *op. cit.*, p. 96.
  - 15 James Schultz, *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2006.
  - 16 Juana María Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, NYU Press, 2014, p. 6.
  - 17 Jacques Lacan, “La Troisième”, *Lettres de l'École freudienne*, no. 16, 1975, p. 177-203. Lacan identifies the *objet a* as the key intersecting place between Real, Symbolic and Imaginary, and the central place of meaning.
  - 18 In Barthes's *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1972), style is commensurate with the writer's insertion into history. It is a moment of self-consciousness when (s)he assumes his or her status as a verbal condition. Barthes views this insertion as a discovery of the writer's relationship with modernity. I suggest Guiraudie uses Gilles's acquisition of Occitan as a moment of insertion – into cultural history, into sexual being and into queer infinity.
  - 19 In *The Culture of Redemption* (Boston, Harvard University Press, 1990), Bersani challenges the ideology of the self as the prism through which art is redeemed. Gilles is freed from the domination of redemption by his renunciation of the self.
  - 20 Bersani views the rectum as a metaphor for AIDS contamination, and also as a metaphor for the dissolution of the (male) self.
  - 21 “The *figure de proue* formed by their bodies projects them out of their selves, out of any absorption in each other – which is to say out of the honored tradition that has idealised sexuality [...]. It takes on the value of a break or seismic shift in a culture's *episteme*; the injunction to find ourselves, and each other, in the sexual is silenced” (Leo Bersani, *Homos*, Boston, Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 165).
  - 22 Alain Badiou, *Éloge de l'amour*, *op. cit.*, p. 25-26.
  - 23 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
  - 24 Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption*, *op. cit.*, p. 204.
  - 25 Bersani defines asceticism as “an ego-divesting discipline” (*I* 35). He discusses it in the context of barebacking where the barebacker hates himself so much he gives himself to others. For Bersani, asceticism

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is a teleology with philosophical, ethical and mystical connotations. This should not be confused with celibacy (as a choice or identity) which has emerged in queer contexts today as a way of thinking sexuality without sex (Benjamin Kahn, *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2013).