This article proposes a rereading of Robert Pinget’s work as seen through the prism of his homosexuality, a proposal that will sound at once both obvious and surprising. For readers of Pinget it will indeed be obvious. One might, of course, hypothesize the existence of radical “hetero-readers” who have yet to discover the sexuality of books that they nonetheless know inside out. For such readers, then, let us mention by way of introduction the explicit nature of homoeroticism in Fable (1971) and Passacaille (1969), the play of transvestism and transsexualism in Baga (1958) and Architruc (1961), and the aristocratic homosexuality of the “gentlemen” in L’Inquisitoire (1962), as well as the more or less explicit homosexuality of all the “masters” and writer characters that the work evokes, the sexualization of the figure of the young boy and the social obsession with pedophilia in a work such as Le Libera (1968), and finally, the question that becomes central in Robert Pinget’s late work, namely that of overcoming his own death, through the fantasized and initiatory transmission from uncle to nephew and from master to young man. For gay and lesbian readers, Robert Pinget’s work is naturally inscribed in the corpus of homosexual literature. For Dennis Cooper, for example, “Pinget was the only gay member of the Nouveau Roman. Pinget was very significant for my work, and his 1971 novel Fable ranks high in my list of top ten favorite novels.” The connection between Pinget and Cooper (and, of course, Tony Duvert) is moreover explicit on many levels, and one might mention, among other things, that Robert Pinget was a reader of William S. Burroughs’s novels.

This article’s proposed reading is nonetheless surprising when formulated in the field of academic (and journalistic) criticism, since Robert Pinget’s work has barely once been read in this way in the sixty years of its existence and reception. Major academic historians such as Madeleine Renouard and

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1. All of Robert Pinget’s books are published by Éditions de Minuit, Paris.
Jean-Claude Liéber has made allusions to the homosexuality of individual characters and isolated passages, while the English researcher John Phillips has analyzed the “displaced eroticism” of Fable (1971), but that is about as far as it goes. The relative neglect of Robert Pinget’s work in the last fifteen years has meant that, to the best of my knowledge, it has slipped through the cracks of any rereading by Anglo-American queer or gay studies. Instead, the 1990s and 2000s saw a wealth of metaphysical and religious material being written about his work. As a result, Robert Pinget’s texts have remained “in the closet” for sixty years.

This article intends to bring them out, but before doing so, let us first examine the reasons for this silence. This strange situation is due, first and foremost, to academic criticism, particularly in France but in other countries as well, in which it is more a question of silence than of ignorance. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has shown, the order of the “closet” that defines the conditions of homosexuality in the twentieth century does not consist in completely hiding one’s homosexuality or in remaining entirely ignorant of that of others. Rather, it introduces uncertainty “in the relations of the known and the unknown, the explicit and the inexplicit,” or in this case, between that which one knows but does not want to know, that which one does not want to know and does not say, and that which one says without really saying it. Thus, Robert Pinget’s critics knew of his homosexuality without knowing it, read it in his texts without reading it, and did not know how nor wish to tap into it. This disinterest brings us back to the theoretical context of the 1960s and 1970s and to the context of poststructuralism and textualism that eschewed any references to the author, as well as a (French) universalism that was wary of any differentialism. Even today, if one were to oppose a queer reading of Robert Pinget’s work, it would be in order to avoid its “ghettoization.” But this is to ignore the critique of universalism that gender studies have put forward in the last twenty years, namely, that there is no universal that is not also sexed and gendered in multiple ways. Homosexuality is only a particularism in a heterosexual view of the world, the view held by literary criticism in the 1960s and 1970s. Thus there are only a few pages written

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3. See, for example, their coauthored article “L’Inquisitoire, Le Libera: (pré)histoire(s) du texte” (Roman 20–50, ’Robert Pinget, L’Inquisitoire, Le Libera’, no. 30 [December 2000]: 31–44), where they write about an “erotic gay scene” (36) in Le Libera, edited from the final published text.
on feminine eroticism in the work of Marguerite Duras, or on the groans of pleasure achieved by the victorious “penis-piston” of Claude Simon’s narrators, or again on the archaic sexual dimension of Robert Pinget’s texts. Such deafness allows us to measure in a concrete way the heterocentrism (and the formalism) of the critical discourse on the Nouveau Roman, a discourse that nonetheless claimed its avant-gardism and its descendence from the sexual revolution. It is only then with the intellectual revolution brought about by what is termed “gender studies” (in a broad sense) that it is possible to envisage another Pinget, one freed from his heterosexual shell and returned to an essential part of his true nature: a queer Pinget, then, in the sense that his work has been kept in the closet and queer criticism consists precisely in “bringing the text out of the closet in which academia has for a long time kept it bound in silence.”

The Game of the Closet

I first attempt to understand how Pinget’s work is positioned in the homosexual history of modern literature. This history rests on a transgressive dynamic. In Never Say I, Michael Lucey has shown that if “saying everything” is the motto of modern literature, and if this often signifies “saying homosexuality,” different transgressions, techniques of hiding, and literary strategies are nonetheless to be found in the generation of Proust, Colette, and Gide; that of Guyotat, Wittig, and Duvert; and that of Hervé Guibert and Guillaume Dustan. Without being strictly linear, this literary history approximately follows the changes that have occurred in peoples’ general outlook. A turning point occurs in the 1980s, when, in the wake of gay and lesbian movements, many writers affirmed their sexuality and turned it into material for their work, expressed in the first person. The reappearance of the autobiographical genre is thus linked to the affirmation of minorities.

Robert Pinget belongs to a world before “coming out.” He never spoke publicly or in interviews about his sexuality, even after the 1980s. This discretion is not unusual in an author of his generation: it can also be found in Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. It is characterized by the evacuation of the figure of the author, a search for impersonality, a refusal of all assigned identity, and the wish to make oneself imperceptible in terms of the apparatus that scientific knowledge brings to bear on sexuality. Proclaiming one’s homosexuality was inconceivable for them, while for the writers of succeeding generations it seemed that the inherent risks of “coming out” were less than

those of the “closet.” Robert Pinget’s silence also comes from more personal motives, notably his religious education, his discretion, and his nonmilitant outlook. His silence went so far as to forbid the critics and the academics with whom he mixed to mention the subject of his sexuality in their publications or in private.  

This concern with effacement, however, is in tension with the reality of the books that clearly display their sexuality. Each one is, of course, different: sexuality is unsurprisingly explicit and transgressive in the big novels of the 1960s and 1970s, while it is discreet (but never absent) in the last notebooks of Monsieur Songe and in Théo ou le temps neuf (1991). In none of them, however, is it openly declared, and the term “homosexuality” is never uttered or proclaimed by those who practice it. Instead, it is systematically made the object of rumors, images, and fragmentary scenes and is never the product of a fully formed narrative. It is alone among the other narrative elements in being expressed mainly through the oblique nature of fiction and the transvestism of double characters. While homosexuality is thus not in this sense encoded in Pinget’s work, neither is it openly shown. It reveals itself, hiding all the while, and is no sooner suggested than it melts away. It then becomes imperceptible for the inattentive or uninterested reader. At this point, the silence that critics have maintained on this part of the work in fact shows the success of the latter, since the main literary question in Pinget’s work was the reconciliation of the desire to confess with the desire to conceal. It drew upon the art common to gay writers who produced their texts in a regime of imposed secrecy, that is, the art of “saying without saying.” From this point of view, Robert Pinget’s work is a fascinating document that gives us an insight into a key period. His work takes homosexuality as its primary yet hidden subject and is written in the extreme tension that occurs between concealment and affirmation. It is thus a work that signifies the end of an era, located between the past and the future. Moreover, it would appear that Pinget was fully aware of this fact, exploring it in the novel that is also his masterpiece, the longest and best known of his books, L’Inquisitoire (1962).

The book opens with the famous injunction, “Yes or no answer.” This is both a self-addressed injunction to creation on Pinget’s part and, on the level of the novel’s story, an order to which the servant of the Château de Broy must respond over the book’s 500 pages, in the course of a tense interrogation. It is not, however, the sexuality of this servant that interests his interrogators:

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8. According to Madeleine Renouard, who knew Robert Pinget well, there were two subjects that one could not bring up with him: politics and his sexuality. Robert Pinget Contemporain Conference, Université Paris VII, 16–17 Oct. 2009.
the servant is not to be seen as the author’s double. Investigating the death of a secretary, the interrogators discover the existence of a Mafia world, with a whole series of trafficking (of drugs, paintings, antiques, and prostitutes) that involves important individuals, the young boys of the area, and a world of interlopers, both local and foreign, who become more and more numerous as the novel progresses. Among the crimes that they suspect, there is one that figures as their real obsession. Their questions posed to the servant invariably return to the topic of the sexuality of the owners of the château and that of their friends. They thus want to know the tone of the evening parties organized in the château; the reason why some dignitaries do not bring their wives along; details of a painting representing “men stark naked,” “ten or twelve of them in a room with a swimming-pool having a bathe or a rest and so on and the guests always used to have a laugh in front of it looking at the details I felt ashamed of them”\(^{10}\); the nature of the relations linking “Mademoiselle Sylvie” and “Mademoiselle Babette,” who is “always smoking cigars it’s funny for a woman”\(^{11}\); and the fact that during a big party at the château, Morgione, who had arrived with “Boubou,” left with “Fifi,” and whether the servant found “it normal this kind of reversal.”\(^{12}\) L’Inquisitoire is thus, as Tony Duvert has written, “the laughable and unsubstantiated story of some old queers with their orgies and their millions,” a “miserable secret,” and an “empty trunk,” which shows the nullity of its plot and the author’s lack of interest in it. This reading would see homosexuality as a trap, obscuring the real subject that lies elsewhere, in the mysteries of writing, of the soul, and of desire.\(^{13}\) Evidently I do not agree with him in this. Homosexuality is indeed the laughable secret of L’Inquisitoire, but to the extent that it is always, as Eve Sedgwick has shown, “at once marginal and central, [. . .] the open secret”\(^{14}\) in a heterosexual society. The subject of L’Inquisitoire is none other than heterosexual society, of which it presents a brilliant parody. Moreover, a large part of his work can be read in this manner. Solitary figures, strangers, writers, masters, and all those who live on the margins of the village communities featured in his novels are all systematically suspected of homosexuality. It is never called by this name, due to a mixture of archaism, popular prudishness, and religious feeling, a fact that makes the situation all the more comic. As well as homophobia, we can find racism, witchcraft, poisoning, and, of course, pedophilia. Le Libera

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11. Ibid., 53.
12. Ibid., 343.
13. Tony Duvert, “La Parole et la Fiction,” Critique 24.252 (1968): 443–61. Tony Duvert’s neglect of the theme of homosexuality is a good illustration of the denial with which the question was treated in the critical field of the time.
(1968) is the carnivalesque representation of this “homosexual panic” that sweeps through an entire community, seized by mad suspicions arising from the fact that such and such an individual “is one” (this comes up in the book about every three pages) and by accusations of crimes committed against children. These accusations are leveled, fairly or otherwise, at fathers, the female schoolteacher, the owners of the château, and finally R.P., the “Révérend Père” or Robert Pinget, himself.

For in *Le Libera* and *L’Inquisitoire*, the writer is evidently speaking about his own situation as a gay writer. To believe otherwise is to fall into the trap of the book, which is precisely to make us believe that homosexuality is a trap. The device of the interrogation, which aims to uncover a secret, as well as the processes of rumor and gossip, is the extreme and grotesque forms through which the violence of mainstream sexual culture is expressed. And the game of hide and seek that the servant plays with his interrogators is also that which the author plays with his readers, extending the order of the closet and the play of revelation/disguise to their furthest possibilities.

Thus, even though he resists his interrogators’ desire to know and blocks their questions with, in particular, his imperturbable sangfroid and his respect for privacy, everything that we know about the morals at the Château de Broy comes to us from the servant himself. It is he who lingers on or suggests an erotic detail, constantly introducing the homosexual hypothesis and leading his interrogators on this trail, yet equivocating as soon as they ask him specific questions. An entire lexical game is thus put in place. On several occasions he speaks of the “peculiar” people who frequent the château. “Explain,” his interrogators demand. “Well a bit bohemian or artistic which isn’t looked on at all well [. . .] in the district,” he retorts by way of example, avoiding the word that he does not want to say.15 Similarly, when he speaks of a young gigolo as being a “very gay”16 young man, although the word obviously refers to the French sense of “joyous,” it also signals the English word “gay,” with its double meaning of “libertine” and then “homosexual,” which at the time was becoming current and would become more widespread in the years to come. If this word might not contain such polysemy for a French reader in the 1960s, it certainly did so for Pinget, who had lived in England and knew the English language very well. “Coded” for French readers in the 1960s, the “gay” of *L’Inquisitoire* functions as a humorous signal for the use of future readers and showed the state of Pinget’s “closet,” just about remaining intact yet bursting at the seams.

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16. Ibid., 48.
L’Inquisitoire thus constitutes a key part of Pinget’s work, where he explores what it is to be a gay writer in a heterosexual society as well as the strategies that he deploys in order to play with the constraints without openly addressing them. I am not trying to suggest that homosexuality is the central question of his work or that it is its secret. However, we can understand nothing of the aesthetic of secrecy that characterizes every act of self-expression in Pinget’s work if we do not take homosexuality into account. Neither can we understand the cultural background that feeds the devices of interrogation and rumor, the two main modes of speech and writing in Pinget’s texts, if we do not make reference to the fact that, in a heterosexual society, homosexuality is at once both a question and a fantasy. And we cannot understand the role that Pinget reserved for archetypes and his desire for the general even when exploring the personal unless we refer to the wish shared by all gay writers to express themselves without falling into the trap of being assigned an identity. Without this, we would never be able to perceive the very concrete role that he reserved for Neo-Romanesque writing. Labyrinths of metatextuality, infinite variations, and contradictions permit the masking, distancing, and derision of content in his books. Only a gay author could endow the aesthetics of the Nouveau Roman with such a legacy of deception and disguise. And in an era when literary criticism was first and foremost occupied by problems of writing, it was child’s play to lead his readers to lose interest in his stories.

**Erotics, Sexuality, Spirituality**

Then there is Pinget’s sense of the erotic. The narrative of *Fable* (1971) represents the most violent and poetic expression of this erotic sense, and it is certainly a considerable contribution to a universal gay literature, albeit one that regretfully remains too little known, as Dennis Cooper points out in his blog entry dedicated to the text. Dedicated to “Alberto,” this modernist narrative poem is built on discontinuity, a rush of images, and the repetition and variation of themes. It narrates the psychological experience of its main character, Mialle, following his breakup with his lover. The text dives into his unconscious, which is also that of archetypes and collective myths: among the recurring images, Mialle sees himself as Narcissus gazing into his fantasies, torn apart by them, his penis devoured by barbarians: “Naked men with leather belts come out of the river and make their way towards the corpse lying on the bank. They carve it up with the knives hanging from their belts and start to devour it. Their leader has reserved the phallus for himself and he

17. The Italian painter Alberto Chiarini.
makes short work of it before starting on the groin.”

Miaille also refigures his relationship with his lover through the character of a Romany gypsy transfigured as a homoerotic Christ, an object of adoration and desire: “A gypsy with coal-black eyes and a whore’s smile, hair curling against the back of his neck, wide shoulders, thin hips in the trousers wrinkling over his feet. Offers his wares. Opens his pants. The Lord will reward you. Brings out the Blessed Sacrament,” and “He is there in front of the kneeling man, points to his circumcision and the other plunges, communes with the Sacrament.” This continues until, like an Oedipus terrified of his visions, he digs out his eyes and leaves the forest to return to the world of men. John Phillips’s reading of the text is the only one that has granted homosexuality a central role.

This reading nonetheless has the drawback of being derived in large part from a classical (heterosexual) Freudian reading of homosexuality. Thus Fable is seen to express an identity crisis in which the castration complex, seen by Phillips as central to the narrative, is the violent symptom of homosexual guilt (Phillips steers clear of attributing this guilt to the author; he merely suggests it). However, the association of emasculation scenes, homoeroticism, and the figure of Narcissus constructs a psychoanalytic scene that is too perfect to be true.

Robert Pinget was very familiar with Freud, and in Fable he is playing with the commonplace of psychoanalysis in the extent that they are both revealing and masking. Moreover, he writes that Miaille’s fantasies provide “a fine subject for those who have a taste for erotio-hallucinatory grimaces.” The text’s real point of interest lies elsewhere, in the link that unites Pinget’s expression of sexuality with the death instinct and perversion. While in Fable and Passacaille (1969) this instinct is concentrated in images of castration, in other books it can be seen to be expressed in the erotic desire for children and adolescents and the sexual crimes of which they are the victims, crimes that sometimes return in the form of the assassination of the old master by his young protégé, or that of the old uncle by his nephew, as happens in Cette voix (1975), for example. Teresa de Lauretis writes about the link that unites gay and lesbian sexualities with a set of images that asserts sickness.

Thus appropriating, in a transgressive fashion, the dominant discourse that portrays homosexuality as a perversion and an illness, the queer writer produces a counter-discourse

19. Ibid., 19, 22.
21. Pinget, Fable 46.
that is deliberately opposed to the apparent health of legal sexuality. Many of Robert Pinget’s narratives contribute in a similar way in terms of provocation and poor taste, from the sexual passion for the mentally handicapped young man in Baga (1958), Quelqu’un (1965), and Passacaille (1969) (notably in the scenes of washing the “Z” of the idiot), to the expression of a vampiric, carnivalesque, and morbid sexuality in Cette voix (1975). Robert Pinget’s texts use literature for intense fantasy exploration and work on the contacts between sexuality and death, bringing to light the “sexual death instinct” discussed by Teresa de Lauretis following Jean Laplanche. Fable liberates the combined power of the sexual and the textual, which undoes constructed identities and abolishes the barriers between the masculine and the feminine, the same and the other, and the living and the dead, as well as the stable unities of representation, pulverized in the movement of writing and the constant shifting of images, words, and motifs in the text.

Consequently, it is when John Phillips turns his attention to the notion of a “displaced erotic” that his article is at its most interesting. The Pingetian text effectively displaces majority erotics. The sexuality that is at work in the text transforms the classic Freudian vision of the castration fantasy, for example, by eroticizing it and by associating it with an act of fellatio. Fable thus displaces the heterosexual commonplace that associates homosexuality with identity crises by introducing images that celebrate the beauty of the male sex organ, associating it with that of plants and the colors of the world, like the image to be found in the first few pages of the book of the body of the young Mialle/Narcissus stretched out on the beach: “The corpse on the river bank was that of a boy with white skin and blue hair, as beautiful as ivory and ultramarine [. . .]. And he saw the people coming up behind and all the golden landscape, his beard was covered with poppies, his eyes were open [. . .]. A blue cluster in which the phallus flowered, a white and pink rod, balls the colour of virginia tobacco.” This gay eroticism is also expressed in the descriptions of the frolics that this “new style of Narcissus” indulges in: he “goes and fornicates in the wood or gratifies himself by watching other people fornicate, his pleasure only springs from his own image which he himself has slowly destroyed.” And throughout the novel it can be seen in the eroticized descriptions of masculine characters, from the very virile servant Brindon of Graal flibuste (1956) (“Massif, carré d’épaules, une tête de dieu et de petites oreilles [. . .] la poitrine qu’une chemise ouverte révélait velue”), to the dark and sexual thinness of the Romany gypsy of Fable and L’Ennemi (1987).

23. Pinget, Fable 8, 10.
24. Ibid., 27.
John Phillips’s article is also interesting when it stops opposing homosexuality and religion, the profane and the sacred. It must be said that Fable develops an entire Rabelaisian vein that does not represent the most interesting part of the text. When the text was republished in 1995, the author distanced himself from certain “blasphemous” passages in a foreword. This distancing is not, I think, done in relation to the homoerotic dimension of the text but rather in relation to the episodes that fail to combine spirituality and sexuality. This combination had already succeeded in Fable with the image of androgynous archangels (“Two figures in white robes, their long hair plaited with oats and cornflowers, they went into the wood for their evening copulation, long ecstasy repeated until morning when their genitals separated in the dew”\(^{26}\)) or again with the image of the idiot as seraph in Passacaille (1980) (“his limpid eyes finally both looking at the same object, his plastered-down hair, his impeccable jeans, the elegance of the sky, and he would keep repeating to us the phrase that would suddenly open the doors of further empyreans one after the other, we would pass from one to the next”\(^{27}\)). The combination is more and more prevalent in the late novels, such as in L’Apocryphe (1980), a novel that meditates on the figure of the shepherd, crossing the double traditions of antiquity with the myth of the eternal return and of Christianity with the annunciation of the coming of Christ. The text is also a gay novel that opens with the representation of the young shepherd, Mediterranean in his looks, an ephebe whose body is built in supple lines, watched by one or two masters in the bedroom decorated with pastel-colored silks with flower motifs, while at the entrance stands “a little settee with pink cushions.”\(^{28}\) It would be completely wrong to think that Robert Pinget’s homosexuality stood in contradiction to his sense of the religious. The citations that I have just given reveal a typically gay aesthetic that associates eroticism and mysticism in a deliberately kitsch set of images. On a deeper level, in the culture at once both heterosexual and rationalist of the literary modernity of which Robert Pinget found himself a contemporary, homosexuality and spirituality were seen to constitute two forms of deviance that the latter’s work undertook to simultaneously express and hide. His taste for occult mysticism and for the tradition of alchemy running parallel to that of Christianity, his choice of Jung over Lacan and of a collective unconscious as the mode for his personality’s expression, and his sexuality form a series of elements that make Pinget a modern heretic and explain his very distinct

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26. Pinget, Fable 11.
place in the history of the Nouveau Roman, as well, of course, as his marginal position.

After digging his eyes out, Miaille, now renamed Miette, returns to the village of his birth and restores an old house before moving into it and transmitting his knowledge of rocks, plants, and manual work (a knowledge lost by the villagers in their process of modernization) to a young boy called Baptiste. In this movement from the figure of the lover to that of the child, *Fable* traces a path that can be found in Pinget’s work as a whole, wherein sexuality is progressively freed from its infernal nature and asceticism becomes increasingly tempting, an asceticism that moreover has been present in Pinget’s work from his earliest texts, for example, *Graal flibuste* (1956). In the late novels, as the author grows older, the sufferings of love are replaced by those of death. With no natural successor, the old master adopts his nephew, following the principle of an oblique filiation through which he hopes to ensure his survival. “Nephew” is also the coded name for the one who is to be initiated in alchemy and in homoeroticism, taking over from the master. As for the figure of the child in whom the old man is reborn in *Théo ou le temps neuf* (1991), it is the perfect incarnation of the Self returning to its origins, participating in a set of gay images of self-reproduction, homogeniture, and the dream of immortality and placed in opposition to mortal heterosexual reproduction.

Robert Pinget’s work can be seen today as the elaboration of a personal myth entirely constructed of borrowings taken from the major texts of Western and Eastern traditions, which are then displaced in order to express a subjectivity that possesses an alternative sexuality. This is one of the potential meanings of the theme of the “new fable” forged from the debris of ancient legends, a theme that can be found in *Fable*, in particular. This task of conversion is all the more subversive and effective since it is discreet, imperceptible to those not in the know, and silently colonizing mainstream culture, since evidently for Pinget (who in this sense belongs to a bygone world), homosexual culture functions in a secret mode (it is *apocryphal*). Tradition is thus entirely reworked and reinterpreted in order to tell the story of the male couple (the narrator of *Graal flibuste* and his coachman Brindon, the minister Baga and the king Architruc, and Al and Ben in the excellent radio play *Nuit* [1973]), as well as that of the dying old man and the young neophyte on whom it falls to carry on the work. This creation of a gay myth through the use and displacement of a cultural

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29. Similarly, Robert Pinget, as a gay Swiss writer who lived for some part of each year on the outskirts of a little village in the Touraine region, used literature as a means of transmitting the knowledge that was in the process of being lost in the countryside through the descriptions of nature and of the changing seasons in, for example, *L’Apocryphe* and *L’Ennemi*. Often, it is the outsider in the community who preserves its memory.
inheritance seems to me to be Pinget’s greatest undertaking, one that moreover permitted him to be at once both extremely personal and extremely general, to reveal everything while at the same time hiding it, and to exist simultaneously in tradition and in subversion.

**The Cross-Dressing Nouveau Roman**

Robert Pinget is also a queer writer in his use of transformation. To be a writer is to adopt masks, to play roles, to dress up. Pinget often explained how every book originated in a search for a consistent “tone” that could extract from his voice one of its composite elements and then objectify it, forcing it and performing it until it produced a different style each time, a style that would reveal a personality as much as it would mask it through theater and its metamorphoses. Thus there is no authentic voice in his writing, since everything is *camp*, “a natural-seeming mask.”30 The voice is constructed through writing and through a very formal emphasis on vocabulary, syntax, punctuation, and grammatical gender. This gives each book its unique “tone,” a mixture of the extremely personal and the extremely artificial. This exploration of the different tonalities of his voice is also an exploration of sexual identities. The characters in his books are for him ways of assuming different masculine and feminine roles. This generalized parody reveals both an ontological absence and the “trouble” of gender. Sexual identity is part of the “tone” and is a constructed entity in Pinget’s texts, since for him gender is not an essence but rather a theater of expressions, not natural but a simulacrum.

Architruc31 is exemplary of these processes of transformation. He is one of the masculine figures in Pinget’s work, a clearly homosexual character who is also a transvestite. Architruc is the absent king, with a corpulent and indeterminate body, an old man-child and a man-woman, who transforms in the course of the novel as the text does over the length of its pages. The author plays with all the conventions in order to maintain an uncertainty as to gender identity in the book. Thus Architruc is in love with his minister Baga and with his “fifille” plant, evidently a feminized substitute for his penis, which he waters every morning, while his cousin Conegrund calls the large “negro” with whom she “fornicates” “Hortensia.” Later on, the novel’s narrator-protagonist transforms into “sister Angela” in a carnivalesque experience of transsexualism that is both physical (“My body, too, submitted to the influence. I began to shave only every third day, then every week and then not at all. My beard stopped growing. In the same way, my sexual desires

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vanished in a sort of mist which rounded off the angles. Sister Louise was very pleased with these transformations [. . .] ‘Be my sister, my brother’” 32 and verbal (“Awakened [‘réveillée’] this morning by the blackbird. Half-past five. I prayed for two hours for the souls of libertines. Thanked God for having rid me of my flesh. I crossed my hands on my chest and yielded to the temptation to fondle it. It’s rounding out. Drove out evil thoughts.” 33). This experience leads him to become not a heterosexual woman (the conformist solution) but a lesbian, as Sister Angela and Sister Louise convert the young and beautiful Marie to the Sapphic cult of the Virgin in a religious provocation that is joyously queer. The play Architruc (1961) develops this confusion into a true cage aux folles, where the king and his minister, two old “queens,” engage in domestic quarrels, and where Baga dresses up as a “woman in the fashion of circa 1900” so that Architruc will make love to him. The play finishes in high farce worthy of a transsexual cabaret, with Death coming to look for the king. Throughout Pinget’s work, one can trace a taste for an ostentatious baroque style, for the exaggerated gesture, for bad taste, for sophistication that becomes extravagant and outrageous, and for the style of big old queens and their grotesque behavior. A taste, as Baga puts it, for “everything foolish one can think of as long as it’s gilded” 34 and provided it introduces a radical opposition to the idea of the natural.

At the other end of the spectrum of Robert Pinget’s various masculine voices can be found the narrator of Quelqu’un, an obsessive character who has washed up in a dingy boarding house that he runs with his “companion” Gaston. He is surrounded by despairing elderly boarders, and his only accomplice is a young mentally handicapped man called Fonfon. This voice is an inextricable mixture of pathos and sarcasm, of real and fake naïvety, and belongs to a marginal individual who, while being relatively sophisticated, still yearns for a simple life has missed his artistic vocation and his inner emotional life. It is the solitary and nostalgic voice of a happiness that is always in the past, contemplated in yellowing snapshots:

First page, first photo at the top, me when Gaston and I had just re-met. I’m on the promenade along the park, on the sidewalk. It's summer. I’m wearing a dark, short-sleeved sports shirt and white trousers, one hand in my pocket, the other in the air, I’m holding my cigarette. I almost remember having said to myself let's look natural, I quickly lit a cigarette and held it up in the air like that,

33. Ibid., 118.
34. Ibid., 114–15.
as if he’d unexpectedly snapped me while I was smoking, and I was also trying to smile in a relaxed sort of way. Yes, I can say that I do remember it, or at least that I remember millions of similar occasions when I was telling myself let’s look natural and carefree. I’d be surprised if I had actually been so carefree that time, I must have been pleased, I was pleased to have met Gaston again and to have talked things over and come up with the solution of the guest house, but from there to having an equally natural and equally carefree expression. . . . I still have all my hair, I was starting to lose it and I was treating it with everything I could think of, lotions, massage, nothing did any good. I’m wearing white espadrilles. Later on I was against espadrilles, they stink.35

This voice is carried across different books, and through despair and irony it modulates the expression of a constructed masculine identity.

Moreover, what better way for a male writer to oppose the idea of the natural than to adopt female roles? This is what Pinget does in *Graal flibuste* when he puts himself in the position of the witch Vaoua in order to go “à la chasse, à la chasse d’amour. Elle a mis ses belles chaussures en peau de requin et sa robe d’aigue-marine” and finishes her pornographic monologue by thanking her mother “de l’avoir faite femme pour avoir ce trou bien chaud.”36 Or again, in *Clope au dossier* (1961), when he puts himself in the mind of Simone, a woman madly in love who is desperately awaiting her sailor husband, and who imagines him next to other men in the kitchens of a cargo ship or with her in a sodomy scene, where the female role is used perversely, in order to facilitate homoeroticism. The female role that Pinget adopts most frequently, however, is that of the spinster, a figure who can be found in the character of the schoolteacher as well as in that of the goat herder and, of course, in the numerous servant figures. A classical reading of this figure would outline the straightforward misogyny of this representation, a misogyny that conforms to a certain gay ethos. In this reading, Pinget, as well as the old aristocratic characters in his books, could be seen to mock the discourse of maids and servants and the idle gossip of old wives by reproducing it in his texts. A queer reading, on the other hand, would show that this process of imitation is first and foremost a work of transformation that aims to mock the masculine gender through a parodic act of becoming a woman and a real identification with these figures. The identity of the “old girl” is more than just a female one in Pinget’s work, since it becomes a transgendered identity

with which numerous characters identify as they would with a mask. For both male and female narrators in his texts, this identity becomes like a third sex; as Pinget writes in *Monsieur Songe* (1982), “You can be an old maid whatever your sex.” It is the type of identity shared by Sophie Narre, the goat farmer in *Passacaille* (1969) and *Fable* (1971), the servant in *L’Inquisitoire* (1962), and La Lorpailleur. It can be found in the tone of maids, in all those “solitary, distorted natures” who delight in “the marvels of the unconscious, that psychological and shitty hotchpotch.” It is also the identity held by Monsieur Songe, who sucks in his stomach in order to impress the mailman, complains of his old age, and lives in close contact with his maid and his niece, both of whom resemble him like peas in a pod. In many ways, *Monsieur Songe* is the perfect little queer text of 1982.

Pinget manages to turn this figure of the spinster into the central tone, color, and identity of many of his novels, and *Le Libera* in particular, which begins in the following way: “If old Lorpailleur is mad I can’t help it. / If old Lorpailleur is mad I can’t help it, nobody can help it and anyone who could prove the contrary would be mighty clever. / If old Lorpailleur is mad but is she mad, she is, claims that I was involved either closely or remotely, that I had a hand in the affair of the Ducreuxs’ little boy [. . .]. Had a hand in the affair of the Ducreuxs’ little boy unbeknownst to anyone, my name wasn’t mentioned at the inquest then here comes this madwoman years afterwards and tongues start wagging. / If old Lorpailleur is mad I said to Verveine I can’t help it, nobody can help it, you must get her locked up, there must be a way, what’s the use of being a chemist then, you must know how it’s done, you must know someone, some authority [etc.].”

The gender of the person who writes/speaks this narrative is constantly being blurred: in the first few lines the voice is clearly masculine (“*trempé*”), but its expression shares the same tone of gossip and rumor as that used by the madwoman about whom he complains, and throughout the novel the narrative voice shifts equally between masculine and feminine characters. La Lorpailleur, whose very name betrays sexual uncertainty (*La Lorpailleur*, and the male pharmacist’s name is Verveine, a feminine noun), is a figure of writing that has transgressed the gendered rules of identity. Her deranged imagination produces all the gossipy chatter and rumor and the madness of writing with which Pinget, as a Nouveau Roman novelist, sought to subvert the codes of novelistic representation. She thus has nothing to do with the Feminine: La Lorpailleur is a role, an abstraction, a

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38. Pinget, *Fable* 45.
ritornello that Pinget extracts from the gossip of old girls and wives in order to produce the great deviant, polymorphic, and erotic machinery of writing. In the later novels, this is supplemented and substituted by the tone of the old master alchemist, which also functions as poetic deduction and composition, and not the proliferation of the verb. That “tone” is not in itself a masculine one, since it contains within it the principle of infinite gossiping talk, while the maids themselves borrow the dead voices of their masters.

The Misfit of the Family

Pinget’s books thus play out the opposition between two types of sexuality and enact an empirical queer sociology. This struggle transcends the simple homosexual/heterosexual dichotomy. Of course, particularly in L’Inquisitoire and L’Ennemi, it takes place through family and marital ties and through male secret societies that corrupt youth. But in addition to the aristocrats, the nobles, the Romany gypsies, and the other gigolos, we must take into consideration all the other characters, the asexual bachelors and spinsters, the melancholic nephews and the effeminate adolescents, the maids, the servants, and the celibate who are left without an heir, all of whom form an “alternative family,” queer not so much for being gay or lesbian necessarily but for the way in which they stand outside the familial and heterosexual norm of sexuality. I refer here to Michael Lucey’s book on the black sheep in the family in Balzac—Balzac being a writer whose use of models and counter-models was so important for the Nouveau Roman and particularly for Pinget.

On one side, then, we have productive familial sexuality that engenders all “la smala,” generations of “clots,” grandparents, parents, and children, while on the other side we have a sexuality that does not play the game of “humanity triumphant, the Mother Ubu of nightmare” or of sexual reproduction. We have seen how those characters who stray from the family model become the object of the worst rumors. The “black sheep of the family” respond to these accusations by grouping together and forming strange families where the viruses of an alternative sexuality and that of writing are passed down over the generations. Thus, the succeeding generations are those of the nephews, the servants, and the maids, taking up the master’s manuscript, adding disorder to existing disorder, maniacal and unproductive scribblers the lot of them. The congenital regime of transitive sexuality and textuality thus finds itself opposed to a regime of contagion that links sex

42. Pinget, The Libera me Domine, 1972, 206.
43. Pinget, Cette Voix, 1975, 21.
and writing and in which can be recognized the intransitive aesthetic of the Nouveau Roman.

Their retaliation is thus waged on the sensitive grounds of inheritance of wealth. “Why would sexuality matter, if it was not linked to inheritance?” as Michael Lucey has asked in relation to Balzac. The question is just as pertinent in Pinget’s books, the last few novels in particular being focused on the problems of inheritance. This reveals his work’s Balzacian dimension, even more so than the characters who reappear from book to book. But while in Balzac the family manages to triumph over a cousin Pons or a cousin Bette, preventing them from leaving their wealth to their lovers, in Pinget it is the gays, the queers, and the solitary who are the masters, in control of their money. They can thus bequeath their wealth to their same-sex friends, to their maid, or to their nephew, ignoring all conventions of blood and family.

This opposition of the two sexualities, straight and gay, does not exactly add up to a class divide. Pinget’s work is not political. Although the author rejected his family’s reactionary views from an early age, he subsequently avoided taking any ideological stance, either critical or revolutionary, unlike other writers of the Nouveau Roman. The master/servant structure that governs the social relations of his novels can even be seen to show a society in which this power structure is unshakable and class struggle is futile. And yet this fictional society is not entirely unmoving. Underneath the social order, secret alliances are being formed, which act as factors of disorder. Aristocrats form bonds with the marginal and with the deprived, masters with their inferiors, uncles with their nephews. This is not done with a political aim but through the same alternative sexuality. It is not so much a particular class that is threatened by these unforeseen alliances, but rather a social and moral order, narrow and provincial, one held by both the bourgeois and the lower classes (country people, townspeople, teachers, shopkeepers, etc.). In Robert Pinget’s books, then, conflicting sexualities replace class warfare. They also contribute (although perhaps despite themselves) to protest movements that, in the second half of the twentieth century, sought to displace political orthodoxy by locating dissent in sexuality, and not just in social class.

L’Inquisitoire: Another Story of the Sexual Revolution

I wish to conclude on this point, returning to L’Inquisitoire (1962) and showing how this novel can thus be seen to mark the appearance of a new sexual “revolution” and new political subjects (minority groups) at the beginning of the 1960s.

44. History has shown to what extent this displacement was potentially progressive and conservative in equal measure, depending on whether one wishes to emphasize class struggle or the sexual revolution. There is no obvious or natural link between them, and it is very much a question of individual interpretation.
As Patrick Longuet has written in an important article,\(^45\) *L’Inquisitoire* captures a turning point in the history of changing opinion, when the old society, which regulates sexuality through marriage and alliance, is replaced by a new society dominated by pleasure and the free rein of sexual attraction. Published in 1962, *L’Inquisitoire* portraits the sexual revolution of the 1960s. However, what Patrick Longuet neglects to say (like any hetero-reader) is that in the novel it is homosexuality that is the agent of this transformation. Through its power of social and collective contagion, homosexuality liberates the desires of a part of Strancy society. The orgies held by the two owners of the castle attract the great and the good, as well as the young boys in the area, many women (lesbians, society types, and libertine aristocratic females), actors, artists, and foreigners from all over (Africans, Germans, Italians, etc.). In short, all society gathers there, complete with its places of pleasure, roles, codes, and different forms of sexuality, an alternative society. This polymorphous sexuality triumphs at the open air party given at the end of the novel, where bodies and social classes mix, and where a Molière play is performed, the name of which is distorted by the servant as “*Les Foutreries d’Escarpin,*”\(^46\) a name that resonates because of the way it blurs the male and female genders, like an early queer manifesto. It should also be added that the opposition between straight and queer sexualities does not follow the lines of a town/country divide. Robert Pinget’s love of country life means that from the beginning he subverts the simplified opposition that would set the sexuality of a progressive urban environment against retrograde country folk. He in fact joins his two passions, sexuality and the country, in his fictional queer countryside.\(^47\)

The novel of 1962 was thus fantasizing about a sexual revolution in which homosexuality would have a central role. It rewrote the sexual revolution of the 1960s before it even happened, skipping right past it to the movements for gay and lesbian emancipation in the 1970s and 1980s that would displace gender and sexual identities far beyond these movements alone, carrying out a work that had been left unfinished (heterocentered) thirty or forty years previously. Of course, Robert Pinet could not have foreseen that. But *L’Inquisitoire* is one of those novels that, situated in a transitional period, is


\(^{46}\) Pinet, *L’Inquisitoire* 338.

\(^{47}\) This is an obvious source of inspiration for the contemporary French director Alain Guiraudie, who is a reader of Pinet and a gay filmmaker who sets his films in the region of Albi where he lives. See in particular the 2009 film *Le Roi de l’évasion*, a comedy that defies classification and takes as its subject (homo)sexual contagion in a country setting.
able to perceive social and historical transformations before other discourses are able to predict them, thanks to the intuitive and disjointed style that is theirs. In advance and in a mode marked by the fantastical and grotesque, he wrote back against the official (heterosexual) history of the sexual revolution.

In this sense *L’Inquisitoire* is an eminently political novel. Its writer was not unaware of this fact. Nor does this happen despite his intentions to the contrary, for Pinget was very much aware of what he was writing. The writer simply distanced himself from the revolution that his book anticipated (and that he himself, perhaps, would have much welcomed) by failing to adhere to the “cause.” This distancing can be seen in the book itself, in the character of the servant. His feeling of being excluded from the practices carried out at the castle, his unremitting mourning for his child and his wife, and his nostalgia for the “holy family” all create a distance from the erotic element of the book, and the belief that sexuality liberates all men. If Robert Pinget appears anywhere in the book, it is perhaps as the character who appears as a joker at the very end of the text. This is Pierre, the third of “those gentlemen” and the avatar of Stendhal’s abbot Blanès; a keen observer of the sky and of the stars, he is the only one to whom the servant feels a connection based on his spiritual aspirations. However, to the servant’s disappointment, he is visited in his tower every evening by the young Fifi, whom he calls “his little Cancer.”48 Pierre, shut off from the world, presents us with the image of an author who has avoided all explicit engagement but who has at heart chosen a maximal deviance (and uniqueness) through his desire for secrecy and the esoteric. Only time will tell if future writers and homo-readers will choose to follow his example.

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