

Chapter One

_____ Epistemologies of Perversion

Desire is essentially a *perverse desire*.

—Julia Kristeva, *Le temps sensible*

Perversity and Perversion

That desire is essentially perverse is one of two main points I wish to argue in this book. The other, however, is that desire is not perversion, and neither is the drive. My position will be that there is no antinomy between these two propositions. For this to be so, a fundamental conceptual distinction must be drawn between desire's essential *perversity* and *perversion* as such; between desire's *generic* excess over its own law and a *particular* response of the subject to this excess—a specific subjective structure, in other words. Indeed, the only way of making sense of Freud's discourse on perversion is to uphold this distinction, which implies a surprising paradox: More fundamentally than “sexual difference” or “the mother's castration,” *what the pervert disavows is the essential perversity of desire*—its constitutive deviation from a genital or phallic norm which nonetheless remains psychically operative as a *sine qua non* of subjectivity properly speaking.

Apart from Freudian psychoanalysis and its Lacanian formalization, there are two additional discursive contexts which traverse this study. The first is queer theory. Too heterogeneous and variously determined to be distilled into a single orthodoxy, queer theory has nonetheless virtually unanimously endorsed the historicist reduction of perversion

to normative instantiations of power. One of my goals will therefore be to spell out the consequences, in particular the political ones, of the introduction into antihomophobic criticism of the distinction I have just drawn.

The second context furnishes a conceptual historicization of perversion. Throughout the vicissitudes it has endured since its derivation from the Latin *perversio*, the meaning of the term has pivoted around a notion of a deflection from a right or true course. Abstracted from its original military connotations into moral, indeed theological, ones, and acquiring in early modernity the properly sexual denotations from which sexology and psychoanalysis would eventually inherit, perversion suggests a deviation which, notably, is logically dependent on the norm from which it deviates. This observation makes intelligible my underlying wager: The disjunction between the *object* and the presumptively reproductive *goal* of the Freudian libido is rigorously analogous to the disjunction which haunts the moral and theological discourses of early modernity. In consequence, it is possible to say that the psychoanalytic concept of perversion in the theory of sexuality inherits directly from the concept's previous incarnations in the related terms "sin," "concupiscence," and indeed "evil," all of which, naturally enough, depend on the idea of a Good from whose respectable course they reliably depart.

By beginning selectively to trace the antecedents of the distinction psychoanalysis posits between desire's perversity and perversion properly speaking, I will try to show how psychoanalysis not only presents a properly dialectical theory of sexuality which splits the subject between a norm and a deviation or transgression, but also how psychoanalysis insists that the effort to suture this split produces the ethically, and indeed politically, problematic perverse structure. Because so much of the current opposition to the psychoanalytic discourse on perversion finds its inspiration in the work of Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, historicist in methodology and relativist in implication, will serve as a propitious place to begin.

Perversion as Power

Joan Copjec has already rigorously argued through Lacan against Foucault's historicist reduction of the Freudian unconscious.¹ Still, it will be helpful briefly to revisit *The History of Sexuality* with the goal of determining precisely how Foucault's definition of perversion as power not only departs from the psychoanalytic argument, but also shares a worrisome affinity with the concept of perversion as psychic structure refined by Lacan. We recall that in 1976 Foucault made the aegis-inaugurating

claim that perversion is a fabrication of “sexuality”—the panoply of discourses originating, depending where in the text one looks, sometime during the seventeenth or eighteenth century. Foucault adduced to this claim the idea that these perversions witnessed their most influential classificatory and theoretical elaboration during the nineteenth century in sexological and psychiatric writing, as well as in the early texts of psychoanalysis. The approach of *The History of Sexuality* to the problematic of perversion is radically nominalist: There were no perverts, Foucault advances, until they were invented by such sexological luminaries as Krafft-Ebing, Ellis, Moll, and Legrain.² Moreover, the invention of perversion played a determining role in a general strategy of power which produced the perversions it attempted to control through this production itself. If sexology constructed the entire baroque panoply of perversities, in other words, it did so only to indulge all the more decadently in the enjoyment of their regulation. By inaugurating a theory of sexuality premised on the idea of a repressive law, modern bourgeois science, including specifically psychoanalysis, perpetuated its disciplinary hegemony through what Foucault terms a “polymorphous incitement to discourse.”³ The discourse of sexuality functioned as a strategy of surveillance which aimed to lure subjects into seeking their truth through the disclosure of sexual experience. This is of course the “repressive hypothesis” Foucault attempted not so much to refute, but to qualify, in an allegedly more accurate and antinormative fashion. Where, in Foucault’s view, the psychoanalytic concept of repression predicates itself on the negative delimitation of a field of transgression—on prohibition, in other words—the “productive” model of sexuality redescribes this instance of repression as itself positive, as producing the very discourse which leads subjects to seek their truth through sex and sexual disclosure.

My own view is that Foucault’s gesture was noble but ill advised. The relatively recent, predominantly Anglo-American phenomenon of queer theory has only underscored how after centuries of legitimately oppressive forms of state and church control over the sexual sphere, control which of course continues to varying degrees today, it stands to reason that these “regimes” would eventually be unmasked for what, unquestionably, they really were: means of marginalizing, criminalizing, and regulating nonnormative modes of sexual behavior. The stubborn reappearance and perpetuation of premodern sodomy laws in a number of jurisdictions, notably in the United States but also in the Muslim world and elsewhere, serves as proof positive of the complicity between power and a voyeuristic, indeed perverse, desire for sexual regulation and surveillance. But at this point a number of skeptical questions must be posed. By qualifying it as *causal*, does Foucault’s productive model of

sexuality not misconstrue the relation between the discourses these regimes or state apparatuses enunciate and what I would call “the real of sex”—actual sexual behaviors in concrete sociohistorical situations? Is sex, in other words, not precisely what is unavailable to the epistemophilic sexological gaze which—one can on this point agree with Foucault—reached its greatest level of classificatory intensity near the end of the nineteenth century? Further, is it not more accurate to posit as the *cause* of the incitement to discourse of which Foucault so eloquently speaks precisely the impossibility of regulating sex, of conjoining the real of sex to its figuration in discourse or power? Finally, is *The History of Sexuality*'s evocation of power as perversion not tantamount to a properly perverse disavowal of the disjunction between discourse and sex?

The frustration of both the various post-Freudian revisionist models of sexual “liberation,” most influentially those of R. D. Laing and Wilhelm Reich,⁴ and the jubilatory *soixante-huitard* effort to inscribe these models onto the real of history, likely led Foucault to wonder about late modernity's failure to found a new era of sexual “happiness,” or to explain why we all, when not succumbing to more severe psychological disruptions, are still afflicted not only by versions of the same neurotic symptoms which plagued Freud's “repressed” patients, but also by what Julia Kristeva has memorably called the “new maladies of the soul.”⁵ Indeed, it is precisely in the form of Foucault's response to the frustration of the liberation model of sexuality that one should situate the properly symptomatic dimension of his intervention. Not coincidentally, I wish to argue, this response features dangerously reactionary political implications. For surely the strongest thesis expressed in *The History of Sexuality* is the one which asserts that if the subject remains unable, at the postliberatory moment, to translate its notion of a full enjoyment onto the level of experience, it is because of an omnipotent agency of power which cannot be localized, one which alienates—appropriates, even—the subject's enjoyment at the very moment it presents itself on the horizon of possible experience. Indeed, I would suggest that the desire to overcome the traumatic, all-seeing invasiveness of power's agency is precisely the motivation which causes the Foucauldian subject to seek an alternative, falsely corporeal, liberation through the abandonment to power of the category of the subject as such. In other words, the truth of the Foucauldian desire to escape power's production of subjective experience is precisely the subject's properly perverse enslavement to power's obscene *jouissance*; this subject's refusal of the risky, self-expropriating agency of an excess pleasure alien to the forms of knowledge.

To do justice to Foucault's memorably rendered argument, however, it will be necessary to examine in greater detail the precise terms

of his claims. Given especially that in so much contemporary queer theory Foucault's late premises are simply assumed, the fundamental questions in my view need to be reposed. What are the theoretical presuppositions informing the critique of sexuality discourse Foucault frames in the terms of an analytics of power? What precisely is the content of Foucault's concept of power, a concept which figures so centrally not only in the entirety of his later work, but also in so many of the more recent texts on sexual politics this work directly inspired? We recall that for Foucault, the nature of contemporary power is such that what he calls the "juridico-discursive" model may no longer accurately describe it. Classical political theory's location of the exercise of power on the formal level of the state and its multiple apparatuses and discourses—of the institutions of civil society, indeed of the panoply of notions which gravitate around the term "democracy," all of which conceptually depend on an idea of abstract political or discursive representation—fail to take account of the diffuseness of a contemporary power which cannot be pinned down.

As a result, the work of late modern or postmodern power is more accurately evoked through a nonsemiotic vocabulary of vectors and forces derived from the physical sciences. In this connection, one also notes that Foucault's criticism of what he takes to be the psychoanalytic understanding of "the law" presupposes that the conceptual edifice of psychoanalysis belongs to this modern or bourgeois representationalist understanding of the field of power and its effects. Along with the spiraling disciplinary capabilities of the increasingly bureaucratic and regulated quality of life in late bourgeois capitalism comes the diffusion of the sphere of power well beyond what formalized legality may legitimately be taken to evoke. Gilles Deleuze concisely renders this notion of power's outstripping of form when he writes with regard to Foucault's framework that "there is no State, only state control."⁶ Power in late modernity is no longer localized, concrete, or traceable; its efficacy has become diffuse, plastic, and elusive.

Foucault links the law of sexuality he attributes to psychoanalysis to the earlier classical idea of an identifiable source of political legitimacy to which everyone is subject through the symbolic authority of a monarch or representative legislative body. Implicit in Foucault's critique of psychoanalysis is therefore the idea that it features a fundamental conceptual archaism—that its concept of law is inextricably tied to a historically surpassed administrative or governmental constellation. Because during the last two centuries or so the modus operandi of power has become increasingly complex and heterogeneous, the idea of law which psychoanalysis presupposes no longer obtains. Like the entire complex

of the repressive hypothesis on which it rests, this concept of law relies, Foucault advances, on “a representation of power which, depending on the use made of it and the position it is accorded with respect to desire, leads to two contrary results: either to the promise of a ‘liberation,’ if power is seen as having only an external hold on desire, or, if it is constitutive of desire itself, to the affirmation: you are always-already trapped” (83).

The importance of this passage is immeasurable because it concisely renders the two variations on the law-of-desire paradigm Foucault deems to stem from the repressive hypothesis he reads into psychoanalysis. In Foucault’s view, of course, both variations rest upon naive and disabling assumptions. First, when the law is viewed to be an outwardly imposed limit on desire—an imposition on the subject of a concrete or localizable source of political discipline—one is tempted by a fascinating utopian belief in liberation, in the possibility of accessing an enjoyment which the law puts out of reach. Second, if the limit to desire is considered to be self-hindering—if desire refers to an external prohibition to make manifest an “internal” or inherent impossibility—then one is left with the familiarly melancholic logic of the “always-already.” If subjects legislate desire themselves, then they are condemned forever to suffer from its inherent capacity to regulate the sexual domain, to stake out and defend specific, acceptable paths for desire. Crucially, in Foucault’s view this latter understanding of desire as internally limited makes the assumption that this limitation is responsible for the subject’s endlessly frustrated effort, markedly complicit with power, to uncover its truth through sex.

It may be too early to state at this juncture that the difficulty with Foucault’s contention lies in its faulty formulation of the notion of a self-legislating, self-limiting desire. Though I will return to this contention shortly, I wish at this point to bring out something of the paradoxical nature of the properly political dimension of Foucault’s project. For despite the fact that Foucault appears to intend his analytics of power as a postutopian model of erotic practice centered on “bodies and pleasures” (157), the final result of Foucault’s conception of perversion as power is to put to ruin the subject’s sovereignty, to smooth over the disjunction between the exercise of normative power and the function of the subject as psychoanalysis defines it. My suggestion, in other words, is that this gesture *exacerbates* the subject’s dependency on the lure of subjective truth which, Foucault is correct to assert, the discourse of sexuality deceptively holds up.

A number of the more striking examples of Foucault’s description of power’s agency in *The History of Sexuality* illuminate the logic of subjective

self-instrumentalization I wish to connect to the psychoanalytic concept of the perverse structure. What is especially remarkable about the textual moments in question is their evocation of the alienation of pleasure from the embodied subject, indeed the attribution to power of the power to extract pleasure from the body and to make use of it to its own ends. Foucault describes, for example, a disembodied faculty of seeing whose power is intensified through physical contact with the (subject's) body. The eye of power performs an "examination and insistent observation" exercised by means of "a physical proximity and an interplay of intense sensations" (44). Power makes use of the human body as a means of converting its abstract or potential power into concrete, lived pleasure-power. Thus, power "sets about contacting bodies, caressing them with its eyes, intensifying areas, electrifying surfaces, dramatizing troubled moments . . . [and] wrapping the sexual body in its embrace" (44). Power becomes sexualized to excess; it obscenely invades our bodily intimacy to prolong and intensify a pleasure the text attributes not to the subject-body, but rather to the noncorporeal faculty of seeing which quite literally colonizes the body. In other words, Foucault ascribes the experience or consciousness of the intensities of pleasure which traverse the body not to an embodied subject, but rather to a nonsubstantive and nonsubjective faculty of power. Indeed, Foucault underlines this externalization of the consciousness of pleasure when he refers to power's "polymorphous conducts" (47) which, as he puts it, "actually extracted from people's bodies and from their pleasures." These pleasures, Foucault continues, "were drawn out, revealed, isolated, intensified, incorporated by multifarious power devices" (48). Foucault's striking language conjures images which compare the relation of power to the subject to that of an agriculturalist to his land: Power implants itself into the earth body in order to intensify a quantity of pleasure which can later be harvested at maturity. In this way the body functions as an instrument of power's will to pleasure. Like the infant whose lack of mobility and language renders it defenseless against the (retroactively traumatic) bodily stimulations occasioned by its caregivers, the Foucauldian subject is subjected to pleasures assumed for the benefit of power. The subject thereby becomes the bodily extension of the substance-consciousness of power.

We can now retrace our steps and revisit my previous claim that Foucault makes his fatal error when he misconstrues the two available paradigms for the law of desire as an irremediably complicit double bind. For is it not the case that the second idea of a self-limiting desire only presents itself to us as a recipe for inescapable entrapment if we are still in the thrall of the first idea of a law externally imposed by power?

More precisely, Foucault's specific formulation of the two modes of the law betrays the truth that the first understanding remains presupposed in the second. In order to proceed from the premise that desire is self-hindering to the conclusion that one is, as Foucault puts it, "always already trapped," one must necessarily have already situated oneself in the position of what Lacan described as the subject's fundamental fantasy. In other words, one must necessarily believe that what the law prohibits is possible or realizable, that the premise of an internally limited desire leads not to the conclusion that desire has no adequate object, but to the ideological fantasy that the law works in tandem with an obscene instance of power which sadistically withholds or extracts from the subject its enjoyment. In this sense the perverse structure can be described as a particular mode of escape from this traumatic fantasy of the Other's *jouissance*. Whereas the neurotic holds fast to this fantasy as a means of postponing or delaying its own self-expropriation in the experience of enjoyment, the pervert transfers its division from *jouissance* onto the Other, adopting the role of enabler of a *jouissance* from which it can remain at a comfortable remove. The neurotic suffers from the disjunction between possible knowledge and the experience of *jouissance*; in political terms, this means that the neurotic is painfully aware of power's separation from itself, its tendency to act in violation of its law. The pervert, in contrast, effects the reconciliation of power with knowledge, seeking to attribute to transgression the consistency of a new law unmarred by contradiction, by a lack of knowledge of its own effects. Foucault's reading of the law-of-desire paradigm shies away from the paradox that the law imposes an interdiction on an impossibility. Far from producing a melancholic defeatism, however, this paradox opens up an empty, impossible space in the social field which provides the subject with the capacity to measure the ethical and political value of actually existing laws.⁷

Foucault's analytics of power enters the realm of perversion, I wish to suggest, when it moves from the identification of the dissimulated interests that concrete, disinterested laws express to a descriptive aesthetics of the relations between forms of discipline exercised by abstract, nonrepresentational vectors of power stripped of determinate attributes and therefore untraceable to the vested interests of identifiable social groups, classes, and constituencies. We can take as an example the modern reincarnation of the medieval laws against sodomy to which Foucault alludes in *The History of Sexuality*. Of course, these laws caused alleged perverts to suffer fiery deaths at the stake and today absurdly allow for the criminal prosecution of subjects who freely engage in specific consensual sexual behaviors.

The proper psychoanalytic approach to this question, in my view, would seek to inquire after the dependence of the law's power on disavowed knowledge of its transgression. That is to say, the attitude of obedience with respect to the law against sodomy is complicit with an unconscious or disavowed homoerotic libidinal dynamic circulating, for example, among the members of a coterie of church fathers for whom sexual desire between men is the enabling but excluded principle of their form of social organization. In contrast, the Foucauldian directives require the critic to move beyond such a concrete identification of interest: They oblige us to displace the surreptitious satisfaction I just attributed to the religious leaders to a power viewed as pure abstract interest, an interest which always transcends its concrete representatives and whose final purpose is the intensification of its own enjoyment. More concretely, we lose the capacity to argue that the law against sodomy is unjust on the grounds that it expresses the disavowed libidinal interest of members of the church hierarchy, or even, in the contemporary context, of the patriarchal figurehead of the bourgeois nuclear family. In sum, Foucauldian power is *intentional*—it encounters no limit or obstacle to its realization, no unconscious which would divide it from itself—but *nonsubjective*—it instrumentalizes the agents through whom it acts, subsumes them under its agenda of disciplinary intensification.

If the law against sodomy is an expression of power *tout court*, then the critical intellectual is left with the modest task of demonstrating how this law is linked to other laws, and these laws to mechanisms of surveillance, and these mechanisms to yet other discourses and knowledges, all of which mutually contribute to the intensification of an elusive power complex's satisfaction. The paradoxical conclusion to be drawn here is that the detection of political interests in discourse requires the deployment of a notion of disinterest. The point, of course, is not that a genuinely disinterested law could ever be written. Rather, the concept of disinterest—the vanishing point of politics which constitutes the horizon of sociality, the very limit or lack of totality which characterizes the social field—must be retained so as to allow for a reasoned demonstration of the covert political interests which actual laws both dissimulate and defend.⁸

Foucault's narrative of power's intensification can be helpfully expressed in terms of the shift from the paradigm of modernity to postmodernity. According to Foucault's historical model, for example, the development of a codified public law at the end of the Middle Ages was the inaugural step in power's evolution from its rigidly determinate, vertical configuration in feudalism toward the modern, diffusely lateral technologies we are viewed to know today. In other words, the idea of

historical process here at work foregrounds power's uninterrupted intensification and abstraction, its progressive reinvention of itself as ever more pervasive and complex vectors of force. Foucault participates in the unfortunate theoretical regression to the postmodernist ethos when he proceeds from the legitimate premise that in late modernity the relation between instances of power and localizable forms of political agency has radically increased in complexity to the *conclusion* that it is no longer possible to establish any connection whatsoever between these instances and interests. Rather than insistently demonstrating how the modernist, liberal universalizing notions of justice, freedom and rights necessarily fail to articulate the disinterest they purport to uphold, and thereby working toward the continual expansion of the terrain of democratic universality, the concept of universality as such is jettisoned from the Foucauldian framework in favor of a gradualist, reformist politics of particularism which assumes that the very forms of political representation function as repressive instruments of power.

More precisely, the difficulty with the Foucauldian reduction of the public sphere to pure, abstract political interest does not consist in its postulate that the universal Good necessarily harbors a particular will it dissimulates beneath a cloak of generality. My objection is rather that Foucault equates the public good with will as such, with a disembodied, deconcretized and nonsubjective mechanism of power which transforms the entire field of social relations into an instrument for its own disciplinary enjoyment. The protoparanoid, properly postmodern aspect of Foucault's later work therefore consists in its formulation of a radically post- or antidialectical political theory, one which casts away as metaphysical archaisms the conceptual tools required to distinguish between interest and power, between the efforts of concrete constituencies or classes to achieve hegemony in a particular social field, and an abstract disciplinary force delinked from concrete collective interests which acts on the social body from everywhere and nowhere. This properly perverse idea of power exacerbates the ideology of victimization, indeed the very defeatist melancholy Foucault wishes to escape, by deconcretizing political agency, by delegitimizing the utopian option of calling into question the disavowed dividends in enjoyment which allow a regime of power to function in the first place. Foucault's idea of power tries to persuade us that our oppression stems not from forces we can trace to specific socioeconomic, legislative, and juridical structures, but from power as such—from a transcendental, nonsubjective intentionality which saturates and disciplines these structures from a place at a remove from the libidinal economies of any concrete actors in the social world.⁹

Perversion as Structure

I have argued that Foucault's definition of perversion dangerously tends toward a subjective orientation which instrumentalizes the subject with respect to the instances of power. The late Foucauldian paradigm ultimately suggests that there is no escape from perversion in its complicity with power abstractly defined. Indeed, the subject becomes the very embodiment of power's perverse *jouissance*, and this gesture of desubjectivation is finally what Foucault has to offer his reader when he recommends an exploration of "bodies and pleasures," which, in light of his previous contentions, can only be attributed to power itself. But a question immediately presents itself: If, as Foucault is nonetheless surely correct to contend, the discourse of perversion has largely functioned throughout its modern history as a means of policing and pathologizing nonnormative sexual behaviors and relationships, how might it be possible to recuperate a concept of perversion without relegitimizing its phobically normative history? My suggestion will be that in its zeal to denounce the complicity of the discourse of perversion with a genuinely oppressive exercise of power, queer theory has thrown the baby out with the proverbial bathwater. More precisely, my insistence that perversion is still a legitimate concept—in clinical psychoanalysis as well as its broader expansion onto political and cultural terrain—need in no manner detract from the ambitions of an antihomophobic critical project. Indeed, the recuperation of the concept of perversion from its phobic analytic baggage may be precisely what is required to recontextualize the concerns of queer theory within a broader, genuinely political project.

From the initial groundbreaking theses of the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* to the later association of perversion with the notions of fetishism and ego splitting, the development of Freud's theory of sexuality provides the rudiments of an alternative approach. The more recent theoretical contributions of Lacanian discourse bring further conceptual precision to the idea Freud began to seize upon of perversion as psychic structure. It should go without saying that a genuinely antihomophobic engagement with psychoanalysis must object to any a priori connection of the strong sense of perversion with homosexuality. Therefore, it will be of particular interest to inquire after the intricacies and contradictions of Freud's discussion of what is known as "object choice" in its relation to perversion. This line of inquiry, I will contend, leads to two surprising conclusions. First, the biological sex of the object-partner is a question of relative indifference to the drive (though this is surely not true in the case of desire properly speaking); in

consequence of this assertion, psychoanalysis quite radically calls into question the discourse of sexual orientation as we know it today. Second, for the biologically male subject, the perverse structure is to be linked not to the choice of a phallic(ized) male sexual object, but rather to the defense against such a choice, in other words to a form of resistance against homosexual desire.

The *Three Essays* contains Freud's first extended meditation on the question of perversion. It lays the groundwork for all his later attempts to elucidate the problematic of sexuality and its link with unconscious desire. In this text Freud makes use of the sexological classifications laid down before him to problematize the rigid differentiation of normative sexuality from perversion. As I will suggest, however, Freud's effort to recast the categories by means of which sexual practices are normalized is fraught with contradiction and distorted by assumptions which remain unhelpfully implicit. Moreover, since its original publication predates Freud's later, properly metapsychological work, the *Three Essays* succeeds in recognizing neither the implication of sexual difference in the structure Freud would later evoke under the term "fetishism" nor the link between the perverse structure and the vicissitudes of the drive. In spite of its failure to lay the groundwork for the structural theory of perversion which was Freud's ultimate ambition and Lacan's signal accomplishment, the *Three Essays* nevertheless establishes the fundamental motifs of the psychoanalytic discourse on perversion. For this reason it merits careful consideration here.

In his discussion of what he terms the sexual "aberrations," Freud's first move is to endorse Krafft-Ebing's distinction in his work *Psychopathia Sexualis* between deviations of sexual object and deviations of sexual aim. In the first group Freud places what the sexological vocabulary of the day referred to as "inverts," along with those who practice what are now known as bestiality and pedophilia. Each of these subjects commonly chooses a nonnormative sexual object, the norm for object choice here figuring as an adult human subject of the opposite sex. In the second category of sexual deviation Freud variously groups fetishists and romantic lovers, voyeurs and exhibitionists, sadists and masochists; members of each of these groups manifest either an "extension" of erotic investment beyond the genital areas of the object or a "fixation" of sexual activity on what Freud called a "preliminary" aim.¹⁰ Freud's suggestion is that these subjects arrest the erotic encounter at a point prior to what is conventionally viewed to be its goal—the one, obviously enough, which renders conception possible. Crucially, Freud links only the second group—the aim deviations—to perversion properly speaking.

One of the more striking consequences of Freud's differentiation of object and aim deviations is to separate out, at least superficially, what is generally called homosexuality from the set of perversions as Freud here defines them. Indeed, the most radical general ramification of this particular figuration of perversion is to deemphasize the importance of the sexual object's attributes. This unusually consequential feature of Freud's theory is brought to the fore in the assertion that "the sexual drive is in the first instance independent of its object" (48). Additionally, as Arnold Davidson is right to underline, Freud's association of perversion with deviations of sexual aim effectively severs the connection between perversion and the rhetoric of physiological and genetic degeneracy which constituted one of the fundamental ideological biases of mid- to late nineteenth-century psychiatric discourses.¹¹ Though, as we will see, other aspects of his formulation beg crucial questions, Freud nonetheless decisively disengages the problematic of perversion from biological and genetic concerns. On one level at least, "perversion" in psychoanalysis begins to designate simply an interruption of the "normal" course of the sexual encounter: a particular variation, in other words, on ordinary sexual relations.

The 1905 definition of perversion, left unaltered after the last set of revisions Freud brought to the *Three Essays*, runs as follows: "Perversions are sexual activities which either a) extend, in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union, or b) linger over the intermediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim" (150). As is quite evident, this definition restricts the sphere of perversion to sexual activity, and only to those activities which deviate from a rigorously defined and explicitly teleological genitality, or from an efficiently realized and equally genitally conceived aim. Though it is easy to protest at the overwhelming generality of his definition, we should note that Freud himself was the first to grasp the unsettling consequences of the idea of normal sexuality that his definition implies. Indeed, the set of perverse sexual behaviors overlaps to such an extent with the presumptively normative ones that Freud is forced to go to great lengths to prevent one from collapsing entirely into the other. At this inaugural moment of Freud's theory of sexuality the epistemological stakes of clinical diagnosis which would haunt all subsequent psychoanalytic thought about perversion become immediately apparent. Given that all sexually active subjects participate in one manner or the other in practices here defined as perverse, then to what criterion does the clinician make reference to diagnose an instance of perversion?

The figuration of homosexuality in Freud's discourse brings to light the weakness of the definition of perversion as a deviation of the sex act's aim. Though the object/aim distinction's overt consequence is to remove the object's attributes, in particular its biological sex, from the set of criteria which define the perverse, the careful reader of the *Three Essays* cannot help but notice that the avowedly conventional rhetoric of genitality which intersperses Freud's discussion renders the status of homosexuality less than clear-cut. Indeed, most sexual activity between same-sex partners does not unambiguously lead to the "normal" sexual aim when this "aim is regarded as being the union of the genitals in the act known as copulation" (149). Yet, as we have already seen, the notion of inversion—that is to say of object deviations—was to differentiate the sexual act with a nonnormative object from the properly perverse, aim-deviant one.

Clearly, several problems arise at this point in Freud's classification of the sexual deviations. First, Freud uncritically recirculates the contradiction implicit in the notion of inversion that he inherits from the sexologists. More precisely, he fails to decide whether inversion designates homosexual desire proper—in other words the desire for sexual relations with a partner of the same biological sex—or rather what one might problematically call "gender nonconformity," in other words feminine behavior performed by, or character traits inherent in, a male subject. Does inversion, in other words, relate to the subject or the object of desire? Though Freud clearly emphasizes the latter, the concept of inversion in the *Three Essays* swings indecisively between its unambiguous reference to same-sex object choice and its significantly less clear designation of the masculinity or femininity of the invert's mind and body. Freud in fact argues against the crude notion attributed to Karl Heinrich Ulrichs that the male homosexual subject features a feminine brain in a male body. "A large proportion of male inverts," Freud writes with conviction, "retain the mental quality of masculinity" (144). Of course, Freud's assertion begs the question what is meant by "mental quality," not to mention the vexed problem of the precise sense of the term "masculinity" which is here put to work.

But there is a second, more conceptually significant, ambiguity in Freud's classification of the sexual deviations. For though Freud will claim that "the union of the genitals" is the norm to which the perversions are referred, the inversion concept presupposes by implication or by default a vague notion of orgasmic relations as a norm for sexual union. The relation between inversion and perversion in the Freudian system is thus fundamentally asymmetrical: We can imagine perversion without inversion (in the instance, for example, of heterosexual anal

intercourse); yet it remains impossible to conceive of inversion without perversion if we posit a sexually active subject and a conventional meaning—the one which was almost certainly Freud’s own—for his phrase “the regions of the body designed for sexual union.”

Of course, Freud’s reconfiguration of perversion’s epistemology in the *Three Essays* was unambiguously radical with respect to the contemporary medical and sexological contexts. But insofar as the normative concept of sexuality against which perversion is defined presupposes a smooth and perfect integration of the drives into a full genitality—a norm which Freud elsewhere, with relative consistency, explicitly problematizes—the inversion/perversion distinction tends toward incoherence, losing in the process any rigorous epistemological value in the context even of the more general theory of sexuality Freud also offers in the *Three Essays*. With admitted generosity the Freudian attitude toward perversion prior to the metapsychological developments can be expressed in the terms of a tolerance for ambiguity. The analyst avers that sexuality is essentially perverse, yet will retain a clinically operative notion of perversion in spite of the difficulty, indeed the apparent impossibility, of defining it with reference to the particularities of the object and aim of sexual relations. What is clear is that the Freud of the *Three Essays* remains unable to coin a satisfactory theoretical definition of perversion on the empirical level of the classification of sexual behaviors. Indeed, as I will now move on to explore, the emergence, however embryonic, of the notion of perversion as structure draws less on the particularities of the subject’s sexual comportment than on the more properly metapsychological dimension of the Freudian project.

The presentation of what Strachey rendered as “component instincts”—the concept Lacan would later develop under the term *pulsions partielles* (partial drives)—helps to redress the impasse toward which the object/aim classification of the *Three Essays* leads.¹² In 1915 Freud attempts to shed light on what he then considered the murkiest area of psychoanalytic inquiry: drive theory. “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes” identifies four attributes and four destinies of the drive; none of these attributes or destinies makes reference to an attainable genital or reproductive norm. Consequentially situating them on “the frontier between the mental and the somatic,” thereby casting aside the conceptual baggage of a pseudo-Cartesian mind/body dualism, Freud defines the drives with reference to the “pressure” they exert on the psychic apparatus; the “aim” they reach by decreasing somatic excitation; the “object” they choose with the utmost variability; and the somatic “source” from which they derive energetic stimulation.¹³ Notable here is the greater level of precision brought to the terms “aim” and “object” with respect to the

earlier classification. Also, Freud specifies that the drives themselves are not only “numerous,” but they “emanate from a great variety of organic sources, act in the first instance independently of one another, and only achieve a more or less complete synthesis at a later stage” (122).

As we will see, this last formulation is far from unproblematic. Still, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes” has the tremendous merit of spelling out Freud’s conception of the drives as fragmented and partial, emanating not—or rather, not exclusively—from the genital areas, but rather from privileged limit zones: points of contact between a corporeal inside and a noncorporeal outside, points which are scattered across the body’s surface. The mouth and anus, for example, are the organic sources which name two of the drives that Freud’s work develops in greatest detail. The drives begin as partial drives, then, and it is only at a “later” point, as Freud vaguely contends, that an event occurs which unifies them into what he equally vaguely calls a “more or less” coherent whole. Before exploring in greater detail what Freud here casts as an act of precarious or imperfect drive unification, however, it is crucial to note a second consequence of his outline of the drive’s attributes. For Freud decisively installs a disjunctive *miss* at the endpoint of the drive’s trajectory. More precisely, he insists on distinguishing in a contrasting fashion the drive’s object from its aim: The drive’s course is disconnected—untethered—from its object. Whereas in the earlier dead-end classificatory formulation “object” confusedly referred to the partner’s anatomical sex, here the term is depersonalized—de-sexualized, even—and reconceived as a kind of body part or organ associated with, but also somehow detachable from (and therefore irreducible to), the partner’s body. The corollaries of Freud’s theoretical turn are equally crucial: Not only are the object’s specifiable attributes qualified as contingent with respect to the drive’s action, but the decrease in psychical tension which constitutes drive satisfaction on Freud’s understanding depends, as I have just intimated, on a missed encounter. The temporary return to psychical equilibrium—the criterion of the drive’s very success—stems directly from its failure to meet the object on its course.

By now it has begun to become clear how Freud’s characterization of the drives reflects what I have referred to as the inherent *perversity* of sexual desire as psychoanalysis formulates it. In our discussion thus far, however, we have encountered no hint of a link between the drive and *perversion* properly speaking. This observation would appear to confirm my second main thesis, namely that neither desire nor the drive is properly speaking perverse. Yet “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes” features extended discussions of the perversions, including sadism and exhibitionism, and this fact presents us with at least the semblance of a

contradiction. My suggestion as to how to deal with this problem is this: It is possible to read this same essay retrospectively from a Lacanian perspective to discover a latent or embryonic theorization of the perverse structure. To this end, it will be necessary to examine Freud's delineation of the drive's four possible "vicissitudes": the available means by which it can attain satisfaction. They run as follows: The drive can turn into "its opposite"; choose the subject's "own self" as its object; or else undergo either "repression" or "sublimation" (126). My contention here will be that Freud's discussion of the first two vicissitudes is one likely source for Lacan's elaboration of his concept of perversion as psychic structure. Two basic characteristics emerge from Freud's consideration of them: a shift from what he terms "activity" to "passivity," and a reversal of the functions subject and object. These formulations of Freud's are surely not the best ones. Yet they begin to formulate what would later become Lacan's main thesis concerning perversion qua structure, namely that the pervert renounces his function as subject of the drive in such a manner that he apprehends his own satisfaction *in* and through the body of his object. In more specifically Lacanian terms, the pervert becomes the "passive"—we will see precisely what this slippery term implies—object-cause of a *jouissance* in his Other, an Other who in consequence becomes the veritable subject of the drive.

But before inquiring after the details of Freud's emergent understanding of this subjective transfer and how it is put to work in the specific perversions, it will be helpful to clarify my earlier contention concerning the problematic Freudian motif of the drive's "unification" or "synthesis." This motif is connected elsewhere in Freud's writing to the notion of the 'resolution'—never unambiguous or indeed convincing—of the Oedipus complex. To be sure, Freud's approach to this issue is ambivalent. On the one hand, the argumentative thrust of "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes" identifies an antimony between the holistic, unifying, properly narcissistic energies of the "ego-instincts," and the divisive, shattering, or parceling effects of the "sexual instincts" (that is, the drives proper). On the other, however, Freud's idealistic—and indeed idealizing—discourse on love in that same essay misleadingly introduces the prospect of a phenomenon he formulates as a "synthesis of all the component instincts of sexuality under the primacy of the genitals and in the service of the reproductive function" (138). Startlingly, Freud fails in this instance to heed the lesson of his own analysis of emotional ambivalence, that is to say, love's propensity to transform dialectically into its opposite. Indeed, far from leading to the paradise of genital-reproductive integration, love—here understood as the attempt to synthesize the partial drives—inevitably leads, as experience consistently

shows, to hate. In the terms of Freud's own analysis, then, the integrative forces of love give rise to the very same tendency toward "the exercise of violence or power on some other person as object" (127) which Freud chooses to provide as his definition of sadism. Worryingly, Freud remains seemingly blind to the manner in which his latent investment in an idea of the drive's normalization aligns itself conceptually with the very ethically troublesome—and in my view properly perverse—vicissitudes of the drive.

In a welcome gesture Lacan decisively reverses this unfortunate and muddled Freudian revisionism; in so doing he recuperates the authentically subversive quality of Freud's own deep thesis about the instinct's bifurcation from its object. "With regard to the biological finality of sexuality, namely reproduction, the drives . . . are partial drives," Lacan declares, suggesting that the libido can only ever go partway toward its presumptively (purely) reproductive goal; and indeed implying that conception can only ever be an accidental outcome of the drive's circuit.¹⁴ Lacan here understands reproduction—or more precisely the very particular and ideal act of eroticism which could hypothetically be stripped down purely to that function—as the nonexistent or unrealizable whole to which the sum of the partial drives will never add up. This explains why Lacan decides to present the partial drive series through the analogy of the montage technique in surrealist collage: In its endless possibilities for juxtaposition, the sequence features no endpoint—no "finality" (169), as Lacan says—and the elements which make it up exhibit no rational, no determinate relation to one another, be this relation conceived as "historical"—temporal, or be it one of logical "deduction" or causal "genesis" (180). Lacan's happy clarification of the Freudian "component instincts" reacquaints us with the dialectical reversal which, as I have been arguing, is the most consequential ramification of the psychoanalytic theory of perversion: The drive is already perverse, already subject to a deviation from its alleged biological-reproductive goal. What is more, the effort to normalize this deviation is in fact the ambition of the pervert. "In perversion," Lacan concisely summarizes with reference to the elusive normative goal (which of course reveals itself to be anything but reproductive), "the target [of the drive] is reached" (182).

We can now return to Freud's own discussion of the perversions to discover how they contain the seeds of Lacan's more precise formulations. As I have already intimated, what "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes" presents as the perversions' two characteristic features—the switch from what is described as an active to a passive aim, together with the reversal of the instinct's content (sadism to masochism, or scopophilia/voyeurism to exhibitionism, for example)—are doubtless better concep-

tualized as an attempt to suture the disjunction, to heal the wound to which they bear witness. In other words, the pervert puts his project into effect by means of a transfer of the subjective function, including the traumatic psychical loss which is its necessary consequence, onto the object of the drive. Perversion in the strong sense is therefore less a function of the kind of dialectical reversal in which Freud tends to frame his conceptualization of the drive's perversity than a refusal of the splitting between the two poles of the couplet between which each partial drive oscillates. "Analytic observation," Freud offers by way of illustration, "leaves us in no doubt that the masochist shares in the enjoyment of the assault upon himself, and that the exhibitionist shares in the enjoyment of [the sight of] his exposure" (127).

As Freud's examples illustrate (as opposed to his theorizations), though perhaps less than perfectly clearly, the pervert is placed within his psychic configuration as at once the subject and the object of *jouissance*. More precisely, perversion provides the opportunity to experience enjoyment outside oneself, as contained within one's victim/partner, while at the same time allowing one to function as the cause or agent of this enjoyment. The perverse scenario features the added benefit of keeping the subject comfortably ensconced at a reassuring psychical remove from the scene of passion. To be sure, the essence of the perverse structure is more paradoxical than Freud's dialectical rhetoric would suggest. For the structure effectively allows the subject to cause his own enjoyment in the Other, and thereby to function at the same time, however vicariously, as both sadist and masochist, scopophilia and exhibitionist, all the while managing to shield himself from the threat of castration which would prevent him from in effect *witnessing himself enjoy*.

The pervert's successful evasion of the immediate consequences of castration—the fact that, in the context of the visual field, for example, the drive pushes him to make himself seen (by the Other qua gaze), but without permitting him to see himself being seen—is made clear in Freud's evocation of what we might legitimately call the "synthesis" of scopophilia and exhibitionism. A step-by-step examination of Freud's formulation of this synthesis will spell out more clearly what renders it perverse. Freud first describes scopophilia as "an *activity* directed toward an extraneous object." At a second moment he evokes a process by which the subject in effect identifies with the gaze—externalizes its own agency of looking, in other words—and proceeds to present "a part of [its] own body" as the object of its own disembodied look. At a third moment the "partial" voyeuristic and exhibitionistic drives are unified into what, I wish to argue, is a perversion properly speaking. Here there

occurs what Freud describes as “the introduction of a new subject to whom one displays oneself in order to be looked at by him” (129).

What had been in the second moment a merely abstract agency of seeing with which the subject identifies, but whose look will threaten to stray elsewhere, now becomes subjectivized. This new subject is of course the pervert’s victim—the “extraneous person,” to use Freud’s expression, who is of course also the pervert himself—through whom the pervert achieves what for the neurotic must remain an unrealizable unconscious fantasy: He sees himself being seen as the possessor of the object-cause of *jouissance*. Naturally, this *jouissance* is at least vicariously his own, but it is also, most importantly, comfortably externalized in the (embodied, subjectivized) Other. Thus the pervert succeeds in carving out for himself an experience of enjoyment which does not compromise, as it must necessarily do for the neurotic, his command over the visual field. More precisely, this configuration preserves the pervert’s immunity from the agency of the gaze, which would otherwise threaten to reveal the shameful secret of his (disavowed) castration, in other words his failure to assert his look seamlessly over the entirety of the visual field.

For all its evocative but somewhat confused hinting at the theory of perversion as psychic structure, however, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes” never makes explicit the distinction I have drawn between desire’s perversity and perversion as such. For help on this issue we can turn once again to Lacan, whose refreshingly clear gloss on Freud’s presentation of the scopophilia/exhibitionism couplet brings a greater level of conceptual precision to the problematic of perversion. In essence, Lacan seizes upon Freud’s intimation of the subjectivization of the object-partner to define perversion as the transfer of the splitting constitutive of subjectivity onto the Other. Whereas the neurotic, himself subjected to symbolic castration, submits to a division between a communicable network of signifiers in the utterance and a repressed, nonsignifying, perverse residue of unconscious desire, the pervert works to precipitate this division in the Other and to present himself as the object which will enable the Other’s self-reconciliation. Returning to the example of the visual field, Lacan stresses how castration has the effect of disrupting perverse voyeuristic pleasure by making manifest an uncanny agency of seeing—the gaze—which the voyeur necessarily fails to locate in space. “The other surprises [the voyeur],” Lacan asserts, “as [an] entirely hidden gaze.” The voyeur becomes a pervert properly speaking when he succeeds in occluding the gaze, in subjectivizing it in such a way that he becomes “situated . . . at the culmination of [the drive’s] loop” (182). The pervert becomes the target which the drive reaches; he succeeds