

Introduction

Leo Bersani

Queer Theory and Beyond

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Is Leo Bersani a queer theorist? Although he has become a frequently cited source for queer thinkers of various orientations, the answer to this query is not quite self-evident. The question becomes necessary when we observe not only that Bersani's work precedes by decades queer theory's naming, but also that in its range his oeuvre exceeds anything that might reasonably be designated as "queer scholarship." What is queer about his readings of Beckett, Proust, Baudelaire, Malick, Resnais, Caravaggio, or Assyrian art? How might we connect his thematic concerns—his work on aesthetics, ethics, and ontology—with queer thought's extant epistemologies?

Bersani's reputation as a queer thinker rests mainly on two texts, the essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1987) and *Homos* (1995). Participating in the field's self-definition in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they book-end its formative period. "Is the Rectum a Grave?" shares its date of publication with both Judith Butler's first book, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (1987), and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987); it predates by some years Butler's influential *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Teresa de Lauretis's "queer theory" issue of *differences* (1991), and Diana Fuss's collection *inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (1991). While "Is the Rectum a Grave?" responds, like many other queer-theoretical texts of the late 1980s, to the urgency of the AIDS crisis—which compelled experimentations, often via the defamiliarizing potential of "high theory," with praxes not immediately recognizable as politically useful or relevant—*Homos* addresses what by the mid-1990s had become one of queer thought's major imperatives: the move, inspired by Foucault, to historicize and, consequently, de-essentialize identity categories, including those organized

around “sexual preference.” Bersani’s insistence that we rethink the implications of antiessentialism is not a merely polemical, and polemically counter-intuitive, antithesis to queer theory’s incipiently hegemonic formulations. It is informed by his by-then extensive work on philosophy and art. In the book’s final chapter, “The Gay Outlaw,” Bersani grafts queer thought onto this body of work: he conceptualizes queerness as an aesthetic, ontological, and political mode that he designates with the neologism “homoness.” What remains difficult about “The Gay Outlaw”—and the chapter shares this with Bersani’s larger oeuvre—is that its propositions bear scarcely any relation to other, including antiessentialist, conceptualizations of queerness and queer thought.¹

To approach Bersani’s putative queerness, it is useful, then, to consider the larger trajectory of his work, which had accumulated its characteristic emphases long before queer theory’s emergence as a recognizable disciplinary orientation. Bersani begins his career in the 1960s with literary-critical commentaries on modernism: his first book, published in 1965, is a monograph on Marcel Proust, an author who remains a constant reference point and sparring partner in all of his later work. The following study, *Balzac to Beckett: Center and Circumference in French Fiction* (1970), deals with a number of authors who similarly influence Bersani’s subsequent thinking. The writers in question are not only the luminaries of French modernism—Balzac, Stendahl, Flaubert, Camus, Robbe-Grillet, and, most importantly, Proust and Beckett—but also such philosophers as Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, and Blanchot. In *Balzac to Beckett*, Bersani arguably becomes the first Anglo-American critic to consider what soon were recognized as the founding texts of French poststructuralist theory. It is this crossillumination of literary texts (and, in later work, and particularly his collaborations with Ulysse Dutoit, painting and film) and philosophy (including, importantly, psychoanalytic theory) that characterizes Bersani’s subsequent thought.

After *Balzac to Beckett*, Bersani’s work in the 1970s is marked by his encounter with psychoanalysis, most notably Jean Laplanche’s reading of Freud. While the final chapter of *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (1976) briefly acknowledges the importance of Laplanche’s work (FA 332n2), it is in *Baudelaire and Freud* (1977) that Bersani provides the first steps toward the synthesis of art and psychoanalysis that he is to elaborate in all of his subsequent work. In ways that I will detail below, the following study, *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé* (1982), continues, if implicitly, to work toward an onto-aesthetics, which is also an onto-ethics, inflected through Laplanche’s understanding of desire. Bersani turns to Freud four years later, in *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (1986), a study of the *aporetic structure* of psychoanalytic thought. In ways that render it original and productive, psychoanalysis is grounded, but also runs aground, in what Bersani calls its “theoretical collapse” (FrB 3). In arguing this, he partially follows Laplanche,

who points out the failed revolutionary potential in psychoanalytic thought. For Laplanche, Freud initiated a revolution that, like Copernicus's disruption of the geocentric universe, disabled Enlightenment thought's egocentric paradigms; yet no sooner did Freud stumble upon his revolutionary formulation of the human's emergence—the moment of the little animal's seduction from need to desire—than he fell back on a prepsychoanalytic understanding of sexuality. This misstep prevented Freud from formulating a “general” theory of seduction, which would have postulated hominization as a process prioritizing otherness and the human subject as a subject of the implacable, undomesticatable other of the unconscious. Instead, Laplanche argues, Freud's post-1915 work is marked by renewed efforts to reinstate versions of the ego—whether in the form of primary narcissism or, with the arrival of the second topography, the id—as the core of the subject.²

Bersani, too, is unrelievedly ambivalent about psychoanalytic theory; but his primary objection to its formulations centers not, as does Laplanche's, on Freud's failure to follow through his original insights. Rather, for Bersani, psychoanalytic theory, Laplanche's included, is profoundly compromised by its reliance on a concept of desire based on lack. Crucially, preceding his initial encounter with Laplanche at the end of *A Future for Astyanax*, Bersani spends a considerable portion of the study in working out the ethical ramifications of what are clearly Hegelian formulations of desire and becoming. It is in this context that his early discussion of Gilles Deleuze's philosophy, in the penultimate chapter of *Balzac to Beckett*, gains its significance as formative for his thinking: it is Deleuze's Nietzschean understanding of desire that orients Bersani's work, rather than the more familiar, indeed hegemonic, formulations of the self-other dialectic that we have inherited from Hegel.

Bersani's ambivalence about psychoanalysis is grounded on ethical considerations: it is unclear to him whether psychoanalysis can provide an account of the subject's desiring relation to the world that would revise the violently oppositional and incorporative assumptions and practices through which we posit ourselves and our others. If psychoanalysis is indebted to a theory of desire whose most influential formulation may be Hegelian dialectics, it frames the self and the other in terms of oppositions that can be overcome only in an annihilative synthesis. To formulate another ethics of being, Bersani turns to numerous aesthetic texts: following Nietzsche's argument for art as a metaphysical practice,³ he calls literature and art our “ontological laboratories” (CS 59, 63), sites for experimentation with life's becoming. In the turn to these laboratories, he executes a move that he later characterizes as one from “the psychoanalytic subject” to “the aesthetic subject.”

Yet this move from psychoanalysis to the aesthetic is always already present in Bersani. Indeed, the preceding account misleadingly prioritizes the philosophical and theoretical sources, including psychoanalysis, that give shape

to his early work. It is important to note that, without fail, Bersani turns to art to give shape to his thought. He has never written a text in which theoretical questions—time, being, narcissism, otherness, singularity, sexuality, the human—would not be worked out and elaborated through aesthetic texts: literature, sculpture, painting, theater, cinema. In Bersani, theory always emerges in an aesthetic practice; for him, what Arthur Lovejoy, speaking of Plato's *Timaeus*, once considered the need “to disengage [a text's] serious philosophical content from the poetic imagery” (46) is a failing proposition. Conversely, too, analyses of art always theorize: as he and Dutoit put it, “the most detailed discussions of specific works [are] not formalistic exercises, but rather absolutely identical with philosophical reflection” (“Response”). Philosophy and aesthetics are thus coimbricated in all of Bersani's work, the single-authored literary studies of *The Culture of Redemption* (1990), *Homos* (1995), *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays* (2010), and *Thoughts and Things* (2014), as well as the Dutoit collaborations, more focused on the visual arts: *Forms of Violence: Narrative in Assyrian Art and Modern Culture* (1985), *Arts of Impoverishment* (1993), *Caravaggio's Secrets* (1998), *Caravaggio* (1999), and *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity* (2004).

As we noted, Bersani's work takes an explicitly queer turn in 1987 with the publication of the celebrated essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?” Originally conceived as a review article of Simon Watney's *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media* (1987), the essay responds to the homophobic terror and glee elicited by the AIDS crisis, and has since inspired a generation of scholars to pursue crossdisciplinary analyses of contemporary sexual politics and cultures. The subsequent book *Homos* is Bersani's most explicit contribution to queer theory: it is a polemical assessment of the field, and a call for its reorientation, from the philosophical and aesthetic perspective that Bersani had developed in the previous decades. It is here that the paradigmatic frame established in his early work becomes relevant to our consideration of his place in the queer-theoretical field. Unlike most, if not all, late 1980s and 1990s thinkers of queerness and desire, he does not proceed from a Hegelian paradigm. Indeed, one's hesitation to interpellate Bersani as a queer thinker stems from his explicit rejection, beginning with his 1970s work, of many of the philosophical tenets that informed the emergent queer thought in the 1990s, most influentially in Butler's work. Beginning with *Subjects of Desire* and *Gender Trouble*, Butler grounds the theory of “performativity” in what she calls a Foucauldian version of Hegelian dialectics, a process of becoming whose unfolding does not reach a stasis in the absolute. Rather than the telos where history finds its closure, Butler replaces the Hegelian absolute with Foucault's notion of power's productivity, a shift that sustains an open future, “constrained by no teleological necessity” (*Psychic* 15), thereby enabling what she is to call the inaccurate repetitions of performativity. In this, her version of the dialectic continues the

reconfiguration of Hegelian philosophy in the tradition of French theory that she discusses already in the early essay “*Geist ist Zeit: French Interpretations of Hegel’s Absolute*” (1985): like Derrida’s and Hyppolite’s, hers is “decapitated” dialectics for the “post-teleological age” (67).

Throughout her work, Butler persists in her Hegelian paradigm, making its pull explicit in such later texts as the collection *Undoing Gender* (2004) and the preface to the tenth anniversary edition of *Gender Trouble*. As she observes in the latter, her oeuvre has consistently operated “within the orbit of a certain set of Hegelian questions” about “the political limit of the subject” (xiv). Although Bersani never explicitly announces it, in *Homos* or elsewhere, it is the Hegelian hegemony in Butlerian queer theory that informs his divergence from its assumptions. As I have suggested, the inevitability of the disagreement becomes discernible when one reads his earliest texts: Bersani disidentifies with Hegelianism already in the 1970s. It is in this paradigmatic context that we should read Bersani’s critique of queer theory in *Homos*, and particularly the new directions for queer thought and politics he offers in “The Gay Outlaw.”

Beyond these observations, and their obvious organization as a dialectic between competing paradigms, one needs to note a certain indifference to queer-theoretical formulations that characterizes Bersani’s work. This indifference makes it difficult to recruit him as a queer theorist, but also suggests the idiosyncratic form of what Bersanian queer theory might look like. If, as I will suggest, Bersani’s entire oeuvre unfolds as the mutual implication and complication of three fields—the *psychoanalytic*, the *aesthetic*, and the *queer*—it is particularly the latter designation that is in need of careful definition. To follow the articulation of these modes in Bersani, and to approach his putative queerness, I here focus on *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé*, a lesser-known text, which not only anticipates the shift, more explicit in his post-1980s work, from psychoanalytic thought to the aesthetic, but also illustrates the *queerness* of the methodology that allows, indeed necessitates, this move. The move toward the aesthetic—always already at work in Bersani’s texts—is also a queering of Bersani’s readerly method.

Bersani prefaces the Mallarmé study by contrasting his method of reading to that of traditional literary scholarship, the form of “critical interpretation” that, according to him, “penetrates and illuminates texts which it thereby rescues from their own enigmatic density” (*DSM* vii). This school of thought deems the literary text in need of an *interpreter*, a trained mediator who, adequately transposing the disabled discourse into comprehensible language, relieves the text from its solipsism, its inability to communicate its messages. I say “disabled” rather than “foreign” because, as Bersani continues, interpretation tackles the text’s “enigma” as a pathology: it approaches its object “as if [the literary text] were sick, as if it were *deficient in narrativity*” (*DSM* vii); like a body unable to complete its natural range of movements in space and time,

the text needs to be delivered from its incommunicative silence, compensated for its stunted abilities.⁴ But its solipsism is also a form of intransigence: the text needs to be not only prosthetically supplemented but, like a difficult customer or willful child, “straightened out” (*DSM* vii). Orthopedic criticism undoes the text’s “enigmatic density” by “substitut[ing] syntactic and narrative coherence for the syntactic and narrative ‘puzzles’ of a poem or essay” (*DSM* vii).

The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé is squeezed between Bersani’s two early studies on psychoanalysis, namely *Baudelaire and Freud* and *The Freudian Body*. Hence, while it does not include a single reference to Laplanche (and only one to Freud),⁵ it is not an accident that the book’s introduction echoes—repeats and anticipates—the Laplanchean and Freudian idioms elaborated in the adjacent texts.⁶ Taking the form of an “enigma” and a “puzzle,” the literary text exerts a fascination like that which Laplanche assigns to “the enigmatic signifier,” the communications—mostly vocal and haptic—with which the caretaker unwittingly seduces the infant from the realm of need (“the vital function”) to that of desire, or sexuality proper. For Laplanche, the moment of the infant’s becoming-human is coincident, better yet synonymous, with the emergence of sexuality, understood psychoanalytically, and the constitution of the unconscious. We must concede, that is, that early critics of psychoanalysis were right to grumble that psychoanalysis reduces everything in the human subject to the sexual, but only if we supplement this concession with the observation that Freudian thought renders the terms of the argument unrecognizable. Laplanche speaks of “the extraordinary broadening of the notion of sexuality occasioned by psychoanalysis”: “sexuality would seem to include not only the small sector of genital activity, not only perversions or neuroses, but all of human activity” (*Life* 25). Sexuality names the “enigma” that compels the uniquely human phenomenon of desire; according to Laplanche, Freud abandoned his early theory of seduction because he mistakenly reverted to a prepsychoanalytic understanding of sexuality. Laplanche’s “general theory of seduction” (where seduction “is no longer restricted to pathology” [*New* 129]) is premised on the argument that Freud, most fully in the *Three Essays*, widened human sexuality’s field of operation so radically as to render the concept all but indefinable. In this context, the stories of seduction that Freud heard from his patients bespoke not—or not necessarily—of a scandalous frequency of child molestation in bourgeois Viennese families, but of a human universal: the infant is traumatically awoken from the slumber of satiety by the incomprehensible messages it receives. The “unmetabolized” remainders of these dispatches, issuing from human others (*der Andere*), are subsequently repressed; this primary repression constitutes, according to Laplanche, the impersonal otherness (*das Andere*) of the unconscious. As the sedimentation of the unreadable remainders of the messages that stir the infant, the unconscious is radically empty; it presents us with enigmas whose impenetrability is like that of the modernist text: “far

from hiding any secret meanings,” Bersani writes of Mallarmé in an implicitly Laplanchean mode, “his difficulty is peculiarly empty” (*DSM ix*).

Bersani thus suggests that art’s appeal rests on its ability to echo the calls constitutive of the human subject, calls that “are seductive because they are opaque, because they convey something enigmatic” (Laplanche, *New* 128). The mode of criticism he targets in *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé* is a response to literature’s alluring interpretability, an effort to trace the secret genealogies of meaning dissimulated by the text’s aesthetic surfaces. The critic’s vocation recapitulates the infant’s seduction by otherness; Mallarmé’s “seductive unreadability” (*DSM ix*) lures us like enigmatic signifiers. The interpretive desire thus initiated is moved by a “nostalgia” for the wholeness of transparent meaning; seeking to domesticate the otherness of art,⁷ literary criticism repeats desire’s frenzied efforts to repair the desiring self’s lack by undoing and assimilating the other’s riddles.⁸ Criticism, like desire, ultimately seeks its own obsolescence, the kind of stasis that, according to Freud, is the aim of *Todestrieb*. Bersani frequently calls this momentum, which wants to “rescue” its objects from the disability of their otherness, “redemptive”: a “pastoral” mode of seeking lost being that is inseparable from a “suicidal violence,” from an effort to disarticulate beings’ individuated forms in a climactic denouement. For Bersani, this form of narrativity organizes our culture’s representations, the stories with which we render ourselves and the world meaningful. Particularly in his 1970s work, he suggests that the “desirous” mode of literary criticism is eminently suitable for reading—or the academic counterpart to—realist fiction, whose narratives frequently climax in the elimination of inassimilable otherness, usually in the form of the tales’ unhappy protagonists.

If Bersani’s conceptualization of the literary text as an “enigma” and a “puzzle” echoes Laplanchean theory, *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé* also anticipates his subsequent study, devoted to Freud. In *The Freudian Body*, Bersani, like a number of his contemporaries, finds in psychoanalytic theories of sexuality a *narrative drive* that domesticates Freud’s most radical insights. The most prominent example of this is the way that, in the *Three Essays*, Freud considers sexuality a “component instinct” only to reassemble its disparate elements into a temporally organized story with adult heterosexual genitality as its narrative telos, the *Aufhebung* in which the “components” discover the higher unity toward which they will always have aspired.⁹ In this frame, Bersani writes, the “perversions of adults . . . become intelligible as the sickness of *uncompleted narratives*” (*FrB* 32), the unsublated remainders of a dialectically organized progress. The criticism that, as he puts it in the Mallarmé study, seeks to “rescue” texts from their “*deficient . . . narrativity*” (*DSM vii*) functions analogously to the teleological thrust that we find in psychoanalysis; critics’ normative efforts to “straighten out” (*DSM vii*) enigmatic texts resemble the reparative practices of institutional psychoanalysis. Art’s enigmas are symptomized in “*deficient*”

narratives that, with enough rehabilitative attention, can be “rescued” from their tortured otherness; works of art are like queer adults, who, according to psychoanalysis, haven’t quite got their stories straight. Mallarmé scholarship has amounted to “an amazingly successful deradicalization of the Mallarméan text” (DSM vii) in the same way that institutionalized practices of psychoanalytic theory have deradicalized the Freudian text: “the move from theory to practice,” Bersani writes, “can . . . be thought of as a flight from a specifically psychoanalytic type of thought” (*FrB* 4).

Even when critics provide “straightened” accounts of literature’s queer designs, interpretation is concluded only to be found, like desire itself, lacking. The riddles of literature, and art in general, have the capacity to reinitiate the audience’s attention, and a new round of reading unfolds further the text’s “enigmatic density,” with the renewed hope of untangling its knots and reaching the stasis of complete transparency. Criticism thus functions as an analogue to the dialectic of desire that psychoanalysis arguably inherits from Western philosophies stretching to Aristophanes’ tale in *The Symposium* (see Grosz 176). This dialectic gives us a movement that aims to appease the subject’s hunger for lost being. The enigmatic other captures the subject—for example, the critic—with the promise of total legibility, a moment that would both vindicate and render obsolete his paranoid vigilance. If Hegel’s is the most influential version of this paradigm, from his earliest texts Bersani works toward alternatives to its commanding formulations. When he writes, in *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé*, that reparative criticism aims at “an annihilating elucidation” of the literary text (DSM vii), we are returned to his initial encounter with psychoanalytic theory in *A Future for Astyanax*. In this early text, he begins to disentangle desire from the chokehold of Hegelian dialectics. “Desire is an activity within a lack,” he comments in the book’s introduction; “it is an appetite stimulated by an absence” (FA 10). This entails an ethical problem concerning *otherness*, a question of central importance for Laplanche too.¹⁰ Here, as in *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé*, the operative term is “annihilation”: “the logic of our desiring fantasies leads ultimately to the annihilation of all otherness. . . . Desire is intrinsically violent both because it spontaneously assumes this annihilation of everything alien to it, and because its fantasies include a rageful recognition of the world’s capacity to resist and survive our desires” (FA 13). Bersani continues later: “desire is always a potential suppression of all otherness. The uninhibited play of desire has a logic which leads, ultimately, to the annihilation of the world” (FA 286). Desire-as-lack, seeking to unriddle the other, proceeds along a trajectory that aims to annihilate, via negation, difference: “Desire imprisoned in lack,” Bersani and Dutoit later write, “avenges itself by a furious incorporation of objects, an attempt literally to stuff the hole of desiring being” (C 71). In this model, difference itself comes into being via lack, a primal separation or privation. The mode of literary criticism Bersani addresses

in the Mallarmé study reenacts desire's organization in human experience: if desire aims at the negation and assimilation of otherness, criticism similarly seeks to solve the text's riddles and, hence, to extinguish its fascinating appeal. Yet the move to absorb and annihilate the other also entails the self's disappearance, or death, as a bounded entity. This is why, for Lacan, all drives are death drives: they aim at the extinction of the very desire that is synonymous with the self's differentiation. As Bersani and Dutoit write thirty years after *A Future for Astyanax*: "The death drive can be satisfied only by the violence that annihilates it" (*FoB* 115).

In all of his subsequent texts, Bersani pursues a set of questions with which he seeks to think desire beyond its Hegelian circuits. Can we imagine a nonappropriative, nonsuicidal approach to the world? Can there be a form of desire that does not aim at the "annihilating elucidation" of the object, the straightening-out of the other's tortuous puzzles? This amounts to asking, as Bersani frequently does, whether it is possible to conceptualize "a nonsadistic type of movement" (*AI* 147), "a nonsadistic relation to external reality" (*CS* 69; see also *AI* 6, Bersani, "Father" 92). In *Caravaggio's Secrets*, Bersani and Dutoit exemplify the "sadistic" imagination with Proust's narrator, whose "most characteristic relation to the external world . . . is a devouring one; his metaphors generally function as sublimated incorporations. They 'solve' the mystery of otherness by digesting it" (*CS* 68).¹¹ Writing in 1998, Bersani and Dutoit thus find in Proust's Marcel an example of the epistemological orientation that Bersani, in his 1982 study on Mallarmé, observes subtending literary criticism and later identifies with the psychoanalytic subject. Marcel's is a consciousness seduced by the secret meanings it intuits behind sundry phenomena; like the *mallarmistes* Bersani speaks of, Marcel seeks to "solve" the mystery of otherness," to unriddle the other. This appropriative dynamic is evident in the narrator's aesthetic theory: Marcel declares that "we do not possess a picture because it hangs in our dining-room if we are incapable of understanding it [*le comprendre*]" (Proust, *Remembrance 2*: 899; *À la Recherche* 4: 132). Bersani calls this form of aesthetics "critical imperialism" (*DSM* vii); as the phrase suggest, it shares its epistemological orientation with other familiar modes of power-knowledge. Noting the incorporative ambitions of knowledge-production has become commonplace, for example, in postcolonial theory. Echoing a number of other critics, Gayatri Spivak speaks of "the knowledge venture of imperialism, which was absolutely spectacular," entailing "the establishment of anthropology, comparative literature, comparative philology, comparative religion, world history, etcetera" (160). Alluding to what Spivak calls the "epistemic violence of imperialism" (163), Édouard Glissant similarly proposes that "the verb *to understand* in the sense of 'to grasp' [*comprendre*] has a fearsome repressive meaning" in the context of twentieth-century globalization: he situates in the early century a shift in the practices of Western colonization

after which “[u]nderstanding cultures . . . became more gratifying than discovering new lands” (*Poetics* 26, brackets in trans.).¹² It is in this context that we should read Bersani’s critique of “textual imperialism” that aims at art’s “mystifyingly intricate surfaces beyond which lie graspable meanings” (*DSM* 60): literary criticism shares with (neo)imperialist discourses and practices “the illusion that the ego can incorporate its environment. This illusion is ennobled and sublimated as the desire to understand, and we call the fruits of invasive appropriation ‘knowledge’” (*CS* 70).¹³

Beginning with *Baudelaire and Freud* and *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé*, Bersani is attracted to Laplanchean psychoanalysis because it seems to offer an alternative to annihilating desire, our culture’s hegemonic form of negotiating otherness. Enigmatic solicitations initiate a process of becoming different from Hegelian *Werden*. This alternative, and its relation to annihilating desire, is at stake in the distinction Laplanche makes between an *enigma* and a *riddle*, both of which are translations of *das Rätsel* in Freud. He observes that Freud uses *Rätsel*—which James Strachey renders alternately as “puzzle” or “riddle”¹⁴—to refer to the force with which sexuality enthralls the child. As Freud’s subheading in the *Three Essays* puts it, sexuality presents the child with “The Riddle of the Sphinx [*Das Rätsel der Sphinx*]” (*Three* 113; *Drei* 100); elsewhere Freud speaks of “the facts and riddles [*Rätsel*] of sexual life” (“Sexual” 174; “Zur sexuelle” 161). But “riddle” may not adequately indicate the otherness Freud encounters: “An enigma, like a riddle, is proposed to the subject by another subject,” Laplanche writes. “But the solution of a riddle in theory is completely in the conscious possession of the one who poses it, and thus it is entirely resolved by the answer. An enigma, on the contrary, can only be proposed by someone who does not master the answer, because his message is a compromise-formation in which his unconscious takes part” (“Time” 254–55n46; see also “Interview” [with Stanton] 10–11). Whereas a “riddle” denotes mysteries that can be unraveled—whose keys, albeit perhaps difficult to locate, lie somewhere—an “enigma” remains opaque, or *undurchschaubar*: transmitted in primary seduction, it confounds not only the message’s recipient but also its sender. An enigma can be issued only by a subject of the unconscious; unlike that of a riddle, its answer is possessed by no one.¹⁵

The riddle and the enigma thus entail different forms of opacity. These modes are analogous to what Bersani in *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé* designates as “two types of difficulty in modern writing” (*DSM* 60). First, there is the complexity of texts like *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, which compel us to unravel their intricate webs of allusions, a labor that promises to reward the reader with the coherent sense plotted by a literary genius. Joyce is Bersani’s primary example of the density of solvable riddles, the critical focus on which “result[s] in the interpretive centering of highly valued texts, a centering which reinforces traditional cultural hierarchies and privileges” (*DSM* 60). As Bersani

continues in *The Culture of Redemption*, *Ulysses* demands to be read “with an excruciatingly close attention and a nearly superhuman memory. It asks that we be nothing but the exegetical machine necessary to complete its sense.” This form of difficulty aims at “the final elucidation of [the text’s] sense, the day when all the connections will have been discovered” (CR 175). The “will have been” couches reading in the future perfect (or, to use the French-inflected translation prevalent in poststructuralist theory, the future anterior) tense: it orients the story’s disjointed materials into a narrative whose denouement, as in a good murder mystery, reveals the function of the seemingly random clues—including the red herrings—that have puzzled the reader. Naming the moment when things fall into place, the future perfect is also the tense in which forewords, prefaces, and introductions operate: they are framing devices that precede the texts after which they have been written. They cohere the narrative. They, one might say, bind the book.¹⁶

If *Ulysses* lures us with riddles, the opacity of the enigma is exemplified, on the other hand, by the Mallarméan text, which “offer[s] a model of a very different type of interpretive activity” (DSM 58). Unlike the Joycean variant, Mallarmé’s obscurity does not impel the reader to excavate laboriously the text’s genealogies of meaning; rather, his work unfolds with, and his reader needs, “an extreme mobility of attention” (DSM 60)—not the “nearly superhuman memory” required to put together the Joycean puzzle, but a susceptibility to being distracted. For Bersani, the author himself exemplifies this mode. Moving forgetfully from poetry to fashion pieces to the Easter egg inscriptions he presented his friends, Mallarmé’s oeuvre, if it can be called such,¹⁷ consists of an “extraordinary diversity of literary projects”: “No single compositional activity seems to have occupied or held Mallarmé as *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* held and centered Joyce” (DSM 46). The Mallarméan text is too flighty, too easily sidetracked, to yield to the imperialist “occupation” that holds sway over the author (and, consequently, the reader) of *Ulysses*. Joycean difficulty is the difficulty of the unconscious whose relentlessly guarded, censored, and dissimulated contents can, with enough therapeutic attention, be discovered, while Mallarmé’s enigmas are, as Bersani writes, oddly contentless. Consequently, the productivity of the Joycean unconscious takes the form of what Deleuze calls *realization*; the forces of the enigmatic unconscious, on the other hand, should be elaborated in terms of Deleuzian *virtuality* and *actualization*. Without explicitly referring to Deleuze, Bersani suggests as much when he writes that, in its purely enigmatic, empty form, “[t]he unconscious never is; it is perhaps an essentially unthinkable, unrealizable reserve of human being—a dimension of virtuality rather than of psychic depth” (IRG 149).¹⁸

Published five years after *Baudelaire and Freud*, Bersani’s first full-fledged encounter with psychoanalysis, the opuscular Mallarmé study thus implicitly argues for Laplanche’s usefulness in disentangling ourselves from the “critical

imperialism” that mistakes art’s “enigmas” for “riddles” that call out to be solved. The dialectic of annihilating desire Bersani addresses in *A Future for Astyanax* drives literary scholarship that aims to coerce the text to yielding its secrets. This criticism is also the scholarly counterpart to the “adaptive” therapy that, by revealing the individual traumas codified in the analysand’s unconscious, hopes to eliminate their crippling effects. Here we find what John Forrester calls psychoanalysis’s “breathhtakingly imperialistic requirement to reveal all” (4). Laplanche breaks from this model, arguably the most efficiently institutionalized form of psychoanalytic practice, in suggesting that the enigmatic, and enigmatically empty, signifier requires that one relinquish his exclusive attention on the other’s secrets and address the otherness within oneself: what appears as the other’s enthralling and threatening alterity is but a repetition of the subject’s own unfamiliarity, his uncanny strangeness to himself. In thus rethinking otherness, Laplanche’s work may disallow the use of psychoanalysis as an instrument of power-knowledge that would share its modes of operation not only with what Foucault calls “confessional” psychology but also with what Glissant and others have identified as the epistemological dynamics of (neo)imperialism. If we are able to grant the enigmas of the other (the unconscious, the work of art, the human other) their radically irresolvable or opaque status, we will move toward a desire that does not suicidally drive toward the possession of otherness: “in esthetic terms the parallel to uncharted sexual desire would, I think, be a mobilizing of forms which makes them radically, permanently unreadable” (DSM 60).

But especially when read from the perspective of later Bersani, it soon becomes obvious that this move—the reconceptualization, via Laplanche, of the dialectical mode of psychoanalysis—proves an ambivalent solution. In an extremely dense couple of pages—pages that insistently, and silently, evoke Laplanche—Bersani takes up Mallarmé’s and Henry James’s texts as laboratories for experimentation with desire, both annihilating and enigmatic. He identifies in *The Golden Bowl*’s Maggie Verver an embodiment of the enigmatic signifier, whose emptiness seduces the observer-reader into desiring interpretation. Her “silent, statue-like presence” solicits in the novel’s other characters an “interpretative scramble” for the meaning of her unreadable stillness; “her enigmatic, withheld sense” renders her “an unpenetrable work of art” (DSM 59). But while, in her unreadability, she is an enigma, and not a riddle, her presence has effects that are not readily distinguishable from those of annihilating desire. If “everyone around her is reduced to frantic conjectures” about her meaning (DSM 59), her appeal is the kind that also impels dialectical formulations of otherness. She commands a *fascinated attention*: “Her imperialistic control over the other figures in the novel is, most directly, the result of their mistaken belief that they can possess her sense; they are victimized by their own yearnings for settled interpretations” (DSM 59, emphasis added). Like “annihilation,”

the term “fascination” (which occurs, let us note, twice in the immediately preceding discussion of Mallarmé [DSM 58]—and whose repetitions throughout Bersani’s oeuvre would warrant their own study)¹⁹ suggests the suicidally aggressive nature of desire: the subject not only seeks to assimilate the other but, like a bird paralyzed by the serpent’s gaze, will itself be devoured. One of the sources for Bersani’s recurring use of this term is Proust: as he writes, fascinating magic leaves one “fe[eling] transfixed, as a small bird might do on catching a sight of a snake” (“Contre” 56); it immobilizes one with “the strange and unexpected forms of an approaching death” (*Remembrance 2*: 87). As Bersani notes in his subsequent commentary on *The Golden Bowl* in *The Freudian Body*, this is also true of Maggie: as “an unreadable text,” “[s]he fascinates the other characters” (*FrB* 84, emphases in original). There is a totalization of violence in fascination: while Maggie is the object of their devouring desire, her enigma exerts an “imperialistic control” over Amerigo, Charlotte, Mr. Verver, and the Assinghams. For Bersani, enigmatic desire, like its annihilating counterpart, captures the subject with the force of fascination: if the dialectic entails “the ‘desiring’ destruction of objects in order to possess them internally” (*FrB* 87), the completion of desire’s movement will also undo the desiring entity itself in the apocalypse of its completion: “death is the happy condition for a total possession” (*FA* 287).

Bersani finds two crucially different aesthetic modes embodied in Maggie: “She (and, through her, James) vacillates between a view of art best represented in the novel by her father (a view in which forms are collected, centralized and immobilized in museums)” —a description in which we should recognize the Joycean aesthetic effect that, as Bersani writes in the following paragraph, “result[s] in the interpretive centering of highly valued texts”—“and a notion of art as improvised, even aleatory ‘mobile syntheses’” (*DSM* 59). The “vacillat[ion]” is no less Bersani’s, who cannot quite settle on an assessment of enigmatic desire’s ethical status: does the enigma allow, as Laplanchean theory suggests, the reconfiguration of otherness such that the narrative violence of the dialectic is obviated, or is the enigma too readily transformed into the kinds of puzzles that exert on the subject a fascinating pull toward catastrophic syntheses? His literary sources—Mallarmé and James—indicate to Bersani that the distinction between the enigma and the riddle is not as tenable as Laplanche needs it to be. The impenetrable enigma readily collapses into—may finally be indistinguishable in its effects from—the riddle (one of whose manifestations Laplanche sees in the id of Freud’s second topography). This entails an ethical problem: the subject is conceptualized as knowable, and psychoanalysis begins its service as one of the discourses of modern disciplinary society.

Having indicated this ambiguity, Bersani nevertheless concludes this crucial section in *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé* by announcing the distinction between two forms of modernist difficulty, one of which—the Joycean

mode—"is consistent with the metaphysical seriousness of a Book which would 'explain' the universe," while the other, exemplified by Mallarmé, "may be the product not only of a continuous relinquishing of tentative formal arrangements but also of a *playfully promiscuous attention* always ready to *swerve to the side of its objects* and to wander in a variety of sensually appealing digressive activities" (DSM 60, emphases added). This characterization of Mallarméan difficulty is a near-paraphrase of an earlier depiction of Flaubert in "The Other Freud" (1978), an essay that constitutes, with *Baudelaire and Freud*, Bersani's first substantial consideration of psychoanalysis: Bersani finds in Flaubert an "*essentially promiscuous attention*, that is, an attention always ready to *swerve to the sides of its objects* and linger over insignificant, irrelevant, and yet sensually appealing digressive activities" (36, emphases added). Recurrent in Bersani (albeit less so in his post-1980s work), "swerving" constitutes one of his keywords.²⁰ It is a name he gives to the possibility of a nonsadistic, nonannihilative relation to otherness, the possibility that our fascinations remain with the purely enigmatic, that they not turn into paranoid investigations of the other's secret jouissance.

In *The Culture of Redemption*, Bersani, describing his methodology, similarly prioritizes what he calls "a lateral mobility," a movement "to the side of objects" (CR 26, emphasis in original), later decreeing this as an ethical orientation: "Our attention can and should be mobile" (CR 204). Echoing Deleuze's argument that what needs to be explained are not lines of flight but their disabling by processes of territorialization, he suggests that we are educated out of our "natural" attention deficit disorder: what should be accounted for is not our flightiness but our cultivation into serious Joyceans. We have, as he writes in "The Other Freud," a "natural tendency to swerve" (48); when we unlearn the attentiveness with which we are taught to appreciate art, we are merely giving in to our "nature." As Bersani and Dutoit continue in *Forms of Violence*, "[w]e have . . . been educated to feel uneasy about our perceptual and affective mobility" (FV 125), a statement whose queer-theoretical ramifications should be carefully unpacked. In another moment of inaccurate self-replication, Bersani repeats the phrase "our natural tendency to swerve" (FV 125) to characterize the spectatorial attention he and Dutoit find solicited by Assyrian palace reliefs, which they consider counterexamples to the ways in which our culture tends to organize representation such that, obeying the logic of annihilating desire, the spectator is hooked on the pleasures (and hence seeks the repetition) of violently climaxing narratives.²¹ Despite their subject matter—celebrations of war and power—the Assyrian palace reliefs (like, as Bersani and Dutoit subsequently argue, Caravaggio's later work [see CS]) illustrate "the surprisingly austere sensuality of art: a sensuality which gratifies our appetites by moving us away from the objects which might have satisfied" our desire. We are trained to dwell on significance, encouraged to detect meaningfulness

in the other's enigmatic solicitations. Yet, rather than promoting "a fanatically organized interest in any part of the world," these works of art persuade us to "swerv[e] away from scenes of violence." This is an ethical question: "in a sense the very restlessness of desire is a guarantee of its curiously mild and pacific nature" (*FV* 125). Rather than dismantling its objects to find out what makes them tick (so as to find the key to its own ontological riddle),²² promiscuous desire is content to sample sundry objects in whose figurations it recognizes—as Freud says, refinds—familiar arrangements.

The sources for the Bersanian ethics of swerving include not only Proust's "digressive" onto-aesthetics—"the mind," Proust writes, "following its habitual course . . . advances by digression, inclining first in one direction, then in the other" (*Remembrance 2*: 191)—or Charles Baudelaire's modernist opposition to "the tyrannical system of straight lines" in painting (Baudelaire 59), but also Laplanche, who locates in Freud a theory of becoming-human as a process of *fourvoisement*, of "going-astray": digression forms the constitutive step in the perverse career of the human being. Bersani proposes that becoming-human begins not, as Lacan would have it, in "aggressivity" but in "digressivity." He implies that the Proustian text, in its "gargantuan digressions" (Goodkin 5), reenacts our digressive bent, the easiness with which the allure of new objects convinces us to abandon our extant attachments. This form of attention is also theorized by psychoanalysis. Bersani observes in one of his more recent texts: "Unlike others before him who had merely noted that desire can *swerve* from the object to which, presumably, it is 'naturally' attached, Freud insisted on the intrinsically *free-floating* nature of desire: it is available to any object and must be trained to focus on the 'proper' object" (*IRG* 159, emphases added). Indeed, the early breakthrough in Freud's analytic practice that marked the emergence of psychoanalytic thought proper provides us a paradigmatic model of promiscuous attention. After all, in "free association" Freud discovered a mode of communication that is perennially distracted, that, to quote Bersani, "is ready to swerve on the side of its object." Freud characterizes this form of listening as "drifting" (*Interpretation* 673), and Laplanche calls it "free-floating" (*Life* 1; "Interpreting" 174) and, later, "hovering" attention ("Closing" 180, 182).²³

Laplanche proposes that this mode not only constitutes the analytic method but should also inform one's approach to Freud. He derives, that is, from Freudian theory a method of reading Freud, suggesting that we read psychoanalysis with the attention that it gives the patient: "this kind of approach to Freud is a necessarily tentative and imperfect effort to transpose *mutatis mutandis* what can be assimilated from the art of listening and interpreting in psychoanalytic therapy. Thus the dual and complementary rule of free association and free-floating attention would find its equivalent in an 'analytic' reading perpetually prepared to treat at the same level sequences of varying length: of words (even if they make no sense), of sentences, and of texts" (*Life* 4; see

also “Interpreting”). From his earliest work onward, Bersani’s own methodology exemplifies this form of *digressive, disinterested, or promiscuous* reading. Rather than the orthopedic-assimilative criticism that wants to “straighten out” the world’s enigmas by tackling them head-on, Bersani puts forward his own critical method as an experimentation with what he calls “circular mobility” (DSM ix). His method of reading cuts a swerving path: as much as, in the second part of *A Future for Astyanax*, he describes his thought as “rather ambivalently moving toward (and moving around)” its objects (FA 310), in the foreword to *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé* he wishes that his own critical discourse proceed with a “non-exegetical mobility around, toward, and away from Mallarmé’s writing” (DSM viii). Apart from psychoanalysis’s, we can again detect Proust’s influence: Bersani’s reading follows the Proustian method of elaboration that “speak[s] around the point rather than to the point” (Goodkin 5). Such digressions need to be distinguished from the double talk we are often told politicians excel in: Bersanian digressiveness is not a process of dissimulation but of pure errancy. Indeed, the method of distracted attention becomes the counterpoint to what Bersani, referring to post-9/11 imperial politics, calls the Bush administration’s “unswerving repetition of lies” (I 62).

If you haven’t already guessed it, it is this method of “swerving” that I propose characterizes Bersani’s “queerness.” As opposed to criticism aiming at the “annihilating elucidation” of the object, what we have here is the kind of tortuous movement that the term’s etymology—from the Latin *torquere*—suggests: a digressive, transversal dance of desire that is not impelled by the need to assimilate an established choreography but moves for the mere pleasure of soliciting company, of crossing a line. The ethics of swerving gives us a readerly method of both ready distraction and inappropriately intense concentration; it also becomes for Bersani an ontological description. It borrows from Freud his insight about the digressive movement of the uneducated, perhaps uneducable, drive, while advocating a critical practice that shares a considerable deal with what Foucault calls, in his effort to reframe historiography via Nietzsche instead of Hegel, “genealogy.”

The swerving movement of nonannihilative desire reformulates the subject’s relation to otherness in terms of what Bersani frequently calls “sociability,” a mode of connectedness among whose practitioners he counts Mallarmé, James, Almódovar, Socrates, Foucault, Beckett, and cruisy gay men. When Bersani writes that sociability is “a form of relationality uncontaminated by desire” (IRG 45), the term “desire” indexes the annihilative, totalizing movement of Hegelian becoming and its attempted reformulation by Laplanche as the enigmatic signifier. Sociability is nondesiring insofar as it is not a response, or a corrective, to a perceived lack as (a) being’s essence. For Bersani, Mallarmé’s lesson is that of unlearning the Joycean mode of artistic intrication. Rather than compel the reader’s single-minded devotion with literary puzzles,

Mallarmé's "obscurity," he writes, "is frequently a mode of his sociability," "the special way in which he makes himself *available* to circumstances" (DSM 60, emphasis added). Unlike Joyce's, Mallarmé's difficulty does not promise meaningfulness or promote exclusiveness; rather, it renders the text, in its emptiness, promiscuously susceptible to varied forms of attention and appropriation. "Mallarmé's restless *availability* to various sorts of projects" and "the ease with which he move[s] among diverse modes of writing" (DSM 46–47, emphasis added) make him a practitioner of swerving attention, the ethical mode of desire that emerges as an alternative to Hegelian annihilation. The Mallarméan text is a laboratory for our own practices of desire: we can glean from his work "the critical terms in which to describe our own encounter with an intense, even voracious, and yet disarmingly light sociability" (DSM 47). Desire's intensiveness—the heedless violence with which it approaches the world—is supplemented by its readiness to be distracted by the appeal of other objects. This is the centrifugal movement that, in relinquishing established foci of attention, Bersani and Dutoit find exemplified in Assyrian reliefs, Caravaggio's later work, as well as Alain Resnais's and Jean-Luc Godard's cinema.²⁴

Pedro Almodóvar's cinema yields another example of such "disarming lightness." In *Forms of Being*, Bersani and Dutoit quote from an interview in which the director identifies an *Ur*-scene of the forms of female sociability we find in films such as *Pepi, Luci, Bom*, *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, and *All About My Mother*: a childhood memory of "women in his provincial village sitting together and talking" (FoB 93).²⁵ This form of sharing contrasts to the mode of attention that one finds in Proust: "Almodóvar has a very non-Proustian reaction to the spectacle of people speaking together," Bersani and Dutoit note. As the exemplar of the psychoanalytic subject, Marcel is haunted by "paranoid mistrust" about secrets whispered beyond his earshot; an unheard conversation is always potentially about him, possibly containing a crucial clue to the missing piece of his being. While Proust's narrator approaches the world with an epistemological hunger, for Almodóvar the sight of women "sitting together and talking" suggests the proliferation of various and sundry "*stories*" whose function is the momentary binding-together of speaking subjects in a pleasurable exchange, rather than the secrets they may convey (FoB 93)—they share what Bersani calls Henry James's "immensely sophisticated talent for talk" (FA 128). In observing a conversation, Marcel, with his "hunger for profundity" (AI 28), becomes Joycean as he endows the scene with hidden significance; for Almodóvar, the women he sees are characterized by their being "exceptionally *available*" (qtd. in FoB 93) to nothing more than "talk." The crucial term here, as in the Mallarmé study, is "availability": the women's chatting, like Mallarmé's "obscurity," renders one "available" for unplanned, promiscuous connections. Almodóvar's women engage what Bersani in *Homos* calls in "intimacies devoid of intimacy," which demand from their

participants “nothing more than that they be . . . available to contact” (*H* 128).²⁶ The notion of “talk” also connects Almódovar’s work to Beckett’s, where we find exemplified a form of sociability not unlike the one that binds Almódovar’s women. Detailing Vladimir and Estragon’s “blathering about nothing in particular” (Beckett 73), *Waiting for Godot* “demonstrates the inevitability of conversation at a cultural juncture when there may be nothing left to talk about; and the strategies of continuing talk survive the absence of psychological subjects” (*CR* 168–69). Similarly, the later text *Company* “performs a solipsistic sociability inherent in the grammar of language itself” (*CR* 169); as Bersani and Dutoit put it, “in *Company* the injunction to speak . . . exists for the sake of the relations it establishes” (*AI* 65).

If we want to observe, beyond the frequent appeals to *ébranlement*, resonances between Bersanian ethics and contemporary queer thought, we may note that “talk” brings Almódovar’s or Beckett’s characters together in a movement of “chance and propinquity” (Delany 128). Bersani’s thinking about sociability, that is, squares with the ethics of cross-class contact that Samuel Delany proposes in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999). Discussing the zoning laws that have changed the demographics of New York’s Times Square over the past decades, Delany distinguishes between “networking”—the planned, aim-oriented engagement between subjects that is characteristic of the workplace and commercial establishments—and “contact,” a sociability between more or less anonymous strangers brought together in public spaces by chance and desire. As Delany shows, urban planning in places like New York City has consistently eradicated spaces where contact might occur, in favor of establishing more regulated venues of commerce and networking; his is a polemic for the benefit of public sex, as a form of contact, in a democratic, egalitarian society (Delany 123–42).²⁷ It is at the question of sociability that Bersani’s ontological analysis—what he frequently calls his “speculations”—meets with the ethics of sexual subcultures that queer theory has produced.

Apart from, but not in contradiction to, the swerve away from the object, Bersani’s tortuous ethics of sociability—which doubles as his ethics of reading—may also entail an inordinate attention to seemingly minor details. The Bersanian critic becomes a bad reader who cannot see the forest for the trees, who neglects the larger picture for the pleasure of dwelling on the insignificant or the accidental. She doesn’t quite get the point, or get to the point, because, operating on a mistaken scale, she is too susceptible to seduction by random detail. She gets carried away by idiosyncratic pleasures that stymie the larger narrative. It is not difficult to recognize in this readerly method the danger that, according to Freud, the human organism faces when it is dominated by what he calls uneducated or undomesticated—*ungezähmte*—drives. Uneducated drives haven’t been harnessed by the reality principle but look for immediate satisfaction, frequently positing fantasy objects, in ways that endanger survival.

The “immature” sexual drive attaches on inappropriate objects, such as random body parts or their fetish stand-ins; it fails to sublimate such fixations by yielding to the more comprehensive and sustainable attachments that for Freud are necessary for the synthesis of adult heterosexual genitality. Like the uneducated drive, the Bersanian reader invests unwisely: she puts her energies in objects and pleasures that go nowhere, that guarantee nothing beyond the benefit of immediate pleasures. To paraphrase Peter Brooks, she fails to read for the plot.

Bersani frequently suggests that the processes of education Freud assigns to the secondary processes, and their resistance by the futureless intensities of the pleasure principle, find cultural counterparts in art, for example in realist fiction’s mapping of the world. If the secondary processes—and, we may add, realist fiction—“teach us how to center objects on which we wish to focus our attentions” (AI 89), other artistic experimentations instruct us on how “to savor associations with no future” (AI 35). If this description resonates with recent queer theories of desire’s heedlessness to futural promises (see Edelman), we should note that Bersani’s persistent critique of annihilative desire, first articulated in *A Future for Astyanax*, not only anticipates but, in ways that are yet to be teased out, constitute the baroque complication of our work on “queer temporalities.” Bersani develops his reading largely through Beckettian aesthetics. In Beckett, dwelling on the intensity of the moment dedialecticizes narrative; instead of the chronological unfolding of narrative, and the narrative ordering of time, in the Beckettian text we encounter “the anguishing nature of time that has been de-narrativized. It is as if narrative time were bearable because it doesn’t really have to be lived; it is time always rushing ahead of itself, anticipating—and seeing in each instant the promise and design of—the end of time” (AI 30). Beckett’s texts proffer a mode of attention that does not orient us messianically toward the Hegelian denouement of “the end of time”; instead of the dialectically ordered *Werden*, where each moment not only arises as a reaction to the preceding one but will also have been but a stopover in the progression toward annihilative synthesis, Beckettian ethics emphasizes *the now* as a unit of monadic intensity. Beckett’s texts are, as Bersani repeats, experimentations in unrelatedness, in singularity. The thought of singularity—which Bersani often, taking his cues from Proust, Deleuze, Laplanche, and Beckett, articulates in the terms of Leibnizian monadology—insists on “essences” whose intensities have not been domesticated by their subsumption under dialectical logic, have not been encased in the teleological certainties of the future perfect. In this model, “[t]ime is not a narrative line leading somewhere, but a mere piling up of instances” (AI 44). The Beckettian monad offers Bersani a way to think about the potentiality of the singular, or the intensive, that escapes the kind of harnessing by goal-oriented narratives that frame Freud’s theory of sexuality. Bersani, that is, claims Beckett as a practitioner of unsublated desire.

In terms of philosophical paradigms, the futurelessness of intensive pleasures—their promise of “no future”—necessitates a turn from Hegel to Nietzsche, from dialectical history, where the sublated past is retained in, and given its meaning by, the higher synthetic order, to the wasteful practices of forgetting, involution, and events. Bersani shares his ambition to think singularity as that which escapes—perhaps undoes—the dialectic with Foucault. In “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (1971), Foucault famously posits a historiographical methodology that refuses to couch events in sense-making narratives whose aim is to “dissolv[e] the singular event into an ideal continuity” (380). His critique finds its target in histories that, consciously or not, take their philosophical cues from Hegel. While in a contemporaneous essay he playfully doubts the very possibility of an “escape” from Hegel (“Discourse” 235), in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” he nevertheless insists on thinking history other than through the totalizing narrative of the dialectic: “we should avoid,” he writes, “accounting for emergence by appeal to its final term” (376). What “emerges” in history, that is, should not be written in the future perfect case of what it will have been once its proper place in accounts of historical development has been established. Rather, we must, Foucault proposes, think events in terms of singularities: Nietzschean genealogy seeks to actualize “the singularity of events outside any monotonous finality” (369). In this, its paradigm abandons historiography “whose perspective on all that precedes it implies *the end of time*, a completed development” (379, emphasis added). This is what Bersani and Dutoit in their commentary on Beckett call the mode of “anticipation” that organizes narratives, precisely the future perfect that, rather than *the now*, trains its eye on “the end of time.” Instead of such teleologically structured narratives (familiar, for example, from Francis Fukuyama’s neoliberal triumphalism), history in its genealogical mode should extract from its archives discontinuous, solipsistic singularities whose capacity for becoming has not been exhausted—but has perhaps been stalled—by their integration as sequences in developmental accounts. This is precisely what Beckett is doing, according to Bersani and Dutoit: his experimentations disrupt narrative and logical continuities by “the disproportionate intensity of . . . individual units” (AI 23). Beckett gives us a method of attention that obfuscates the larger map by getting immersed in minor details. Foucault calls these details “the subtle, singular, and subindividual marks” (“Nietzsche” 373) whose “event-ness” genealogy and Bersani’s method of swerving seek to activate.

It is thus not only at the question of homosexual aske²⁸ but also the issue of the archive that Bersani’s project meets and draws from Foucault’s: both aim to activate “the events of history, its jolts, its surprises” (Foucault, “Nietzsche” 373). They share their trajectory, moreover, with recent queer thought that has seen history as an archive of the “undetoned energy” of forgotten, unrecognized, or dismissed events (Freeman xvi). In the same way