theories and methodologies

Bersani's Freudian Body

JANE GALLOP

IN 1986 LEO BERSANI PUBLISHED A BOOK ENTITLED *THE FREUDIAN BODY*. I LOVE THAT TITLE. FROM THE FIRST TIME I HEARD IT, OVER TWO decades ago, up through this very moment, I have continued to love that title. To be honest, I wish it were mine—which is why I borrowed it for my essay here. I'm not exactly sure what I take this title to mean—probably something like a definitive delineation of a Freudian theory of the body. I'm not exactly sure what I take it to promise—probably something like a reconceptualization of the body beyond positivism, beyond Christian views of nature, beyond biologistic ideology. It sounds like something I really want. One thing is for sure: the title made me want to read the book.

And so the first time I read this book, I was disappointed, frustrated, and even a little angry. I did not find "the Freudian body" promised by the title. "Bait and switch," I thought bitterly. "You fucking tease!"

In the middle of the book, as he begins to discuss Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Bersani states, "The title of the book announces its major perversity." As he goes on to explain, "Far from proposing an instinct which would supersede or somehow have priority over the pleasure principle, Freud's book is actually his most revealing and most disguised exploration of the nature of pleasure" (55). Freud's title promises to take us beyond, but, according to Bersani, the book is "actually" far from taking us beyond. While I found myself agreeing with Bersani's reading and even relishing its ironies, I also thought that his wonderful sentence—"The title of the book announces its major perversity"—could apply to the book I was reading, the book where this sentence appears. I wondered if this crisp sentence, placed almost exactly at the book's midpoint, might not be a clue for Bersani's reader, might not be Bersani winking at us.

Disappointed and frustrated by my first reading, I nonetheless went back and reread the book, trying this time to keep my dreams,

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desires, and preconceptions at bay. But it was not only that I didn't find the postpositive, postnormative body that the title had set me dreaming of (I could not fairly fault the book for not living up to my fantasies) and that the book did not deliver whatever definitive delineation the title phrase promised but also that "the Freudian body"—the phrase—did not appear in the book.

When I scanned for the title phrase, the closest thing I found was "the Freudian text." That phrase appears on the first page of the book, in the second sentence of the introduction. It in fact appears four times in the book's short introduction. The reader opens the book to hear about "the Freudian body" and instead immediately hears about "the Freudian text."

"The Freudian text has become . . . a privileged object of . . . deconstructive criticism," the book's second sentence tells us. (Remember, this is 1986.) A few pages later, the introduction asserts "the necessity of reading the Freudian text as if it were a work of art" (5). Bersani also refers to his "operations on the Freudian text" (3). All these statements are about the book's methodology in reading Freud. While the word *operations* (used for what Bersani does to the text) has a variety of connotations, one of them is brought to the fore when he refers, not to his own work, but to "the frequently brilliant analytic surgery recently practiced on the Freudian text" (2). The image here of performing surgery imagines—if ever so lightly and briefly—the Freudian text as a body.

I don't want to place too much weight on this introduction, however. It is a short piece, written separately from the more substantive chapters (which were all delivered as lectures at the prestigious Collège de France); it is really just a methodological introduction—hence the emphasis on "the text." Yet I find I can't quite dismiss "the Freudian text" as mere methodology: not only is the phrase in the book's conclusion, but it in fact appears in three of the book's four chapters.

It is not exactly the phrase's methodological status that makes me want to dismiss it but something related to that status. More than any other part of the book, the introduction feels dated. Attempting to situate his contribution, Bersani repeatedly refers to the then contemporary critical scene. "The Freudian text" is very much part of that description: "the . . . analytic surgery *recently practiced* on the Freudian text," "The Freudian text has become . . . a privileged object of . . . deconstructive criticism." The introduction's "recent" is anything but; "deconstructive criticism" sounds so last century. When we approach Bersani's book today, "the Freudian body" still sounds fresh, still beckons with promise; "the Freudian text" is embarrassingly eighties.

Wanting to do a reading that is not dated, I wonder what the author would still claim, still value today. In the conclusion of his most recent book, *Intimacies*, published in 2008, Bersani writes, "In *The Freudian Body*, I spoke of masochism as an evolutionary conquest: it allows the infant to survive the gap between a period of shattering stimuli and the development of resistant, defensive ego structures. Loving to be shattered becomes a self-preservative strategy" (121).

This is the only reference to *The Freudian Body* in Bersani's most recent book, and the idea of masochism as "evolutionary conquest," as "self-preservative strategy," sounds as surprising today, as powerful and original, as it did in 1986. Of all the things in *The Freudian Body*, this quite stunning idea is the one that Bersani has continued to deploy over the two decades since the book appeared. If we look, for example, at his most frequently cited text, the article "Is the Rectum a Grave?," published just a year after *The Freudian Body*, we find that its single reference to the 1986 book is remarkably consistent with what he will say twenty-one years later in *Intimacies*. Here is Bersani in 1987:

> In *The Freudian Body*, I proposed that . . . masochism could even be thought of as an

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> evolutionary conquest in the sense that it allows the infant to survive . . . the . . . period during which infants are shattered with stimuli for which they have not yet developed defensive or integrative ego structures. Masochism would be the psychical strategy that partially defeats a biologically dysfunctional process of maturation. (217)

Intimacies is a casual book, without scholarly apparatus; "Is the Rectum a Grave?," as an article in a scholarly journal, adds a footnote to the self-citation: "See . . . *The Freudian Body* . . . chapter II, especially pp. 38–39" (217n). Let me now turn to where this note directs us, to the site of what the author continues over the course of two decades to value, to the site of the book's evergreen insight.

On page 39 of *The Freudian Body*, halfway through the second chapter, we find what Bersani has continued to proclaim:

> It is perhaps only because sexuality is . . . grounded in masochism that the human organism survives the gap between the period of shattering stimuli and the development of resistant or defensive ego structures. . . . Masochism would be the psychical strategy which partially defeats a biologically dysfunctional process of maturation. Masochism . . . allows us to survive our infancy and early childhood. . . . Masochism . . . is an inherited disposition resulting from an *evolutionary conquest*. (39)

I am quite taken with this idea; I find it smart, valuable, even liberating. I believe it promises a new way of thinking about sexuality, about adaptation and survival. The idea bears repeating; it alone makes *The Freudian Body* a major contribution—not just to psychoanalytic thinking but also to any attempt to figure out how to live in this world. Yet, much as I admire the idea on page 39, I want now to turn the page.

Much as I appreciate Bersani's big idea, it is not the body I was promised. I haven't given up my quest for the body promised by the title, and, as it turns out, that body appears just one page after this historic proclamation of masochism as a self-preservative strategy, one page after the passage Bersani has been sending us back to for twenty years. Although the phrase "the Freudian body" never appears as such in the book, the closest we get to it just happens to be on page 40.

Chapter 2 of *The Freudian Body* is divided into three sections, each concerned with a different text. The passage on masochism as survival mechanism occurs near the end of the first and longest section, which is on Freud's *Three Essays*; the section continues for only one more page. The conclusion to the section, a closure to the reading of *Three Essays*, begins immediately after the passage on masochism as evolutionary conquest and peaks a page later, where Bersani declares, "Freud's work is the textual recapitulation of the psychoanalytic body's existence" (40). Note "the psychoanalytic body." Here is something that answers to our desire for "the Freudian body," something that begins to give us what the title made us want.

When we finally find "the psychoanalytic body" in this book, it is in conjunction with the Freudian text. This sentence is about the relation between the psychoanalytic body and the psychoanalytic text, a relation I had been wondering about since I opened a book to read about the Freudian body and found myself instead reading about the Freudian text. Bersani here tells us that Freud's text is a "recapitulation" of the psychoanalytic body. *Recapitulate* is a resonant verb in a psychoanalytic context, thanks to Freud's attachment to the old saw that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. My dictionary tells me that the word means "repeats in concise form": the Freudian text is a concise repetition of the Freudian body, a more readily understood and easily readable version. As a longtime reader of Freud, I love this bold theorization of what can be found in Freud's text.

While this short and powerful declaration begins to answer my question about the status of the eponymous body in this book,

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there is even more of what I'm looking for in the final sentence of the same paragraph—the last sentence of the section on *Three Essays*, the sentence before the break in the text that divides the chapter into sections.

Having discussed how the ego deals with the stimuli that characterize "the first years of human life," the paragraph and the section conclude, "That process is described and exemplified in the textual body—*in corpore freudiano*—of psychoanalytic discourse" (40). This sentence is as close as the book gets to giving us "the Freudian body"; in fact, we could say that it does give us the phrase—except that the phrase is in Latin.

This sentence continues the theorization of the psychoanalytic text that we saw in Bersani's statement about recapitulation, a theorization I am gratified to see. Freud's text does two things at the same time, "describe" and "exemplify": we can read it both as an account of psychodynamics and as an example of those dynamics. We might want to ponder the similarities and differences between "recapitulate" and "exemplify" . . . but what about that crazy Latin phrase?

Why does Bersani break into Latin here? The three-word phrase is a loose repetition of the longer English "in the textual body . . . of psychoanalytic discourse." Bersani adds the Latin right after "textual body," as if that phrase were insufficient, as if he couldn't get at what he wanted to say in English and had to turn to another language. What Latin affords him is the word *corpus*, a word that can mean both "text" and "body." Whereas in English he can only adjoin the two in the phrase "textual body," he turns to Latin so he can say, *at one and the same time and inextricably*, "Freudian text" and "Freudian body." He turns to a language in which the Freudian corpus doesn't just describe, doesn't just recapitulate, but is the Freudian body.

Going back into Bersani's 1986 book to look for the Freudian body, I find it in the conclusion of his reading of *Three Essays*, very close to what Bersani subsequently identified as the crux of the book. I would like to examine one more avatar of the Freudian body in this book, this one even more forced and awkward than the turn to Latin, this one likewise scholarly but more moving, both more textual and more lurid, sexier. It is found in the book's first chapter, in the reading of Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

Bersani begins his reading of *Civilization* by remarking the "striking banality" of that book's central argument. He goes on to wonder if "the psychoanalytic view of human suffering and happiness" has become merely "commonplace, schematic, and abstractly general." "Such would in fact be the case," writes Bersani, "if certain other impulses were not being made textually visible in a very curious play between the body of Freud's text (more exactly, the upper body) and his footnotes" (13–14).

While "the body of [the] text," used as it is here in contrast to "footnotes," is so common as to be (even in a book called *The Freudian Body*) unremarkable, "the upper body of the text" is odd. And while we might want to dismiss the latter phrase as merely parenthetical, a passing eccentricity, Bersani goes on to use it (no longer in parentheses) four more times in the next three pages. Switching from the conventional "body of [the] text" to the peculiar "upper body of the text" makes the text's body less conventional and more anatomical.

Bersani does not like the "upper body" of this Freudian text: it is where he finds repressive banality. In his reading of *Civilization and Its Discontents*—a reading with which I completely concur, I might add—all the action is in the footnotes. "Wildness springs into the Freudian text," Bersani says as he begins his reading, "from . . . these bottom-of-the-page thoughts" (14). He goes on to suggest that "the footnotes play the role of the . . . unconscious in this work," that Freud is "enacting compositionally his own formulation of the laws of repression and symptom-formation" (18). This

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is a neat reading: in a mapping of depth psychology, the footnotes are the *sub*conscious, lying below what he comes to call "the text proper . . . the quite proper text" (18).

Neat as this reading is, or maybe precisely because it is so neat, mapping the text as a psyche risks losing something of Bersani's odd and awkward insistence on the corporeality of the Freudian text, the insistence I hear in his repeated use of "upper body." When he insists on "upper body," I begin to see the footnotes as "lower body"—as not just feet but also other lower-body parts.

The schematic understanding of the footnotes, on the other hand, clever and agreeable as it is, risks glossing over the peculiarity of Freud's notes and especially of Bersani's response to them. I am thinking in particular of the ridiculously long and nutty notes at the beginning and end of *Civilization*'s fourth chapter, about which *The Freudian Body* says:

> What did convulse our being, Freud suggests in the astonishing footnotes on the first and last pages of chapter 4, was . . . the smell of sex before we adopted an erect posture. . . . Nothing is stranger—I am inclined to say nothing is more moving—in *Civilization and its Discontents* than the erotically confessional footnotes—that is, those moments when the distinguished . . . imagination of the text descends into a footnote where it enjoys the fantasy of a mythic, prehistoric convulsing of our physical being in the passionate sniffing of a male on all fours. (17)

I would love to spend more time on these crazy Freudian footnotes, but I will just comment on the way they move Bersani. On his confession that "nothing [in this text] is more moving." And on the image—erotic, passionate, animal, convulsing, physical—"of a male on all fours." Here, at last, it seems to me, is "the Freudian body." It might even be the exemplary Freudian body if we think of all those moments in Freud when neurotics are moved by a body on all fours.

Bersani's strangely insistent *upper body* of the text might also be the *upright body*, as opposed to the *lowered body* as "the text *descends* into a footnote." Maybe it's just me, but, reading this description of a male on all fours, I find myself recalling an image in "Is the Rectum a Grave?" of another nonupright, "lower," convulsed male body—"the . . . image of a grown man, legs high in the air" (212). While that is, to my mind, Bersani's most memorable image of the body, we might want to call this variant published a year earlier (the male on all fours), this erotic position, Bersani's Freudian body.

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