theories and methodologies

Embarrassment and the Forms of Redemption

DAVID KURNICK

Homosexuality is the truth of love.

—Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*

No one wants to be called a homosexual.

—Leo Bersani, *Homos*

THE TENSION BETWEEN MY EPIGRAPHS' FORMULATIONS MIGHT BE TAKEN AS THE ANIMATING ENERGY OF QUEER THEORY. IF THE FIRST provides queers with a vision of our sexuality as flatteringly significant, the second insists with punishing concision that this significance resists translation into social equality. More precisely, the two statements could be seen as mutually constitutive: it is the social abjection of the sexually deviant that makes our sexuality interesting, as it is the excessive symbolic interest of our difference that has made us socially volatile. Or at least this has been one guiding assumption of queer theory, which has leveraged some of its most imaginative work by arrogating to queerness a symbolic centrality out of all proportion to queers' acknowledged numbers or to our social power.[1] It is no accident that Leo Bersani articulates the unpleasant reality principle in this little epigraphic debate. His writing is justly famous for its suspicion of the rhetoric of identitarian dignity and for its refusal of conceptual consolations of all kinds; Bersani's habit of accentuating the negative made his work the inevitable reference point for *PMLA*'s May 2006 Forum on the "antisocial thesis" in queer theory (Caserio et al.). And yet for all Bersani's insistence on exposing the fantasies of transcendence undergirding our culture and our criticism, his writing is perhaps even more remarkable for the way it has managed to combine that scouring sensibility with a sense of ethical and political promise. Refusing the culture of redemption won't, of course, quite save you. But Bersani's work has always suggested that it could be beneficent (a favorite word of his).

An intuition that in Bersani's work something resembling redemption lies close to nonredemption—and that both have something

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to do with homosexuality—animated my first reading, as a graduate student in the late nineties, of the opening pages of his 1976 book *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature*. I knew Bersani as the author of "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1987) and *Homos* (1995) and didn't recognize the minor character from the Trojan War legend named in the earlier book's title, let alone Racine's retelling of the story in *Andromaque*—the version that served as Bersani's inspiration. But there was something familiar about Bersani's account of Racine's play. The Greek hero Pyrrhus, having helped pillage Troy, makes an offer to Hector's widow, Andromaque: if she agrees to marry him, he will disobey his orders to deliver her son Astyanax to the Greeks, who plan to kill him because they fear that Hector's child may one day want to avenge Troy's destruction. Andromaque's response to Pyrrhus makes clear that the unthinkability of his proposal is part of its appeal; in a feverish passage, she recalls her first glimpse of Pyrrhus, blood-spattered and raving with genocidal fury on the night he led the charge on Troy.

While most interpreters of the play see this speech as its moral knot—an expression of what makes Andromaque's dilemma count as tragic—Bersani's interpretation of Pyrrhus's come-on and Andromaque's transfixed reaction to it is marvelously perverse. He sees the agreement between the Greek warrior and the Trojan princess as a "liberating betrayal of the past" (49), a declaration of independence from the routines of desire and vengeance that structure Racinian theater. Born of warfare and sexual obsession, the decision to save Astyanax becomes the herald of a "psychological and social order" that would escape those pathologies (4). In asking Andromaque to forsake her home, her family, and her nation, "this murderous lover implicitly asks Andromaque to help him invent a future for Astyanax" (12). It's important that Racine never hints at what this future might look like. Bersani insists on Astyanax's blankness, his status as pure form: "the play brings us only to the threshold of a new order for which no content is imagined"; Astyanax "is himself *no one*," a placeholder for an idea of unfettered potentiality (49).

Why then, reading *A Future for Astyanax*, did I find it irresistible to fill in this formal container with a quite specific content? Couldn't Astyanax be—how could he *not* be—a homo? When Bersani insisted that Astyanax's survival presupposed "a history of great destructions," wasn't this a figure for the psychic and sometimes physical violence one provokes in identifying oneself as queer? When Bersani claimed that Astyanax will be "responsible to and for nothing," that he will be "neither Greek nor Trojan" and will "have no father to imitate" (50), wasn't he describing the exhilarating promise of erotic and social self-fashioning that makes that violence worth risking? Didn't Bersani's refusal to specify what shape such a life might take echo every queer person's fantasies and fears about what exactly we are supposed to do with our unapologetically claimed freedoms? A concluding footnote to Bersani's opening chapter seemed to clinch the deal:

> Appropriately, this will be the last time I mention Astyanax. His indeterminate "presence" is scattered throughout this book, disseminated in forms as various as Proust's metaphorical imagination, the Stendhalian hero's improvised monologues, a Robert Wilson tableau, and, in *Histoire d'O*, Sir Stephen's ghastly pale face just after his initials are burned into O's buttocks . . .
>
> (I suppose I should add that the Astyanax I've referred to is definitely not the child in the ancient version of the story who is hurled by the Greeks from the walls of Troy. Racine's Astyanax will live.) (321n8; ellipses in orig.)

The parenthetical interpolation sounds an unexpected note of quasi-parental concern, a desire to rescue the defenseless child for the delights obscurely but potently conveyed

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in the previous paragraph. Indeed, the footnote reads like a plan for a hypothetical queer bildungsroman: lushly self-poeticizing Proustian childhood, glamorous Stendhalian arrival in the big city, tickets to experimental theater, the promise of scary, mind-altering sex. Could there be any doubt that the "new mode of desire" (49) for which Bersani wanted to save little Astyanax was a fantasy of metropolitan gay life circa, say, 1976?

Compelling as I found this question, it also embarrassed me; it still does. The whole point of Astyanax's future was its fragmented, dispersed, unrepresentable quality. To assemble these shards into any coherent future was clearly a mistake, and to go on to label that future "gay" was to compound the mistake with bathos. In a sense, of course, my desire to read gayness into Bersani's austerely nonspecific text was only a special case of a general form of embarrassment endemic to reading itself: the embarrassment of identification, or the more basic embarrassment of thematization on which identification depends. And yet Bersani's writing seems expressly designed to tempt any reading into just such an overreading. His Astyanax is an emblem of pure formalism, almost a figure of figuration. But every figure is also a lure, an invitation to literalism of the crudest kind, and Bersani's intense formalism has always been combined with an equally intense awareness of the impossibility of sustaining pure formalism. That alertness to the double game of figuration has made his work (even the work that precedes the advent of queer theory, even the work that has "nothing to do" with homosexuality) representative of what remains most exciting and moving in queer studies.

The project of queer theory, after all, has had a productively weird relation to identitarian thematizations. On the one hand, queer critique is founded on a refusal of identity. As Michael Warner writes in one of the field's better-known moments of self-articulation, the term *queer* distances itself from the specificity of gay and lesbian identities in the service of a broader emphasis on sexual norms. "The preference for 'queer' represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal" (xxvi). Although Warner doesn't put it this way, it is not hard to understand the inaugural move of queer theory as a formalizing gesture, a refusal of the limitation of any particular identitarian content. Queer theory's formalism, its refusal to know beforehand to what concrete constituency its structural insights might apply, has always been a sign of its conceptual ambition. And yet there are limitations to this formalizing impulse, and Warner understood that queer theory's intellectual and political success would also depend on how well it accounted for the intransigent facts of the body, identity, gender, and desire that resist such abstraction.

No critic has been more imaginative than Bersani in finding ways simultaneously to recognize and to resist the thematizations inherent in sexual life. The unresolved, perhaps irresolvable, tension between identity's contents and its formal patterning has been central to his most important work overtly concerned with homosexuality. It's difficult to say, for example, which is the most arresting aspect of "Is the Rectum a Grave?"—Bersani's aggressively abstract claims about gayness (his insistence that sex between men "dangerously represents *jouissance* as a mode of ascesis" [222]) or his aggressively particular ones (his deflationary description of the gay bathhouse as a place where "your looks, muscles, hair distribution, size of cock, and shape of ass determined exactly how happy you were going to be during those few hours" [206]). It's probably most accurate to say that the essay's power depends on this balancing act, this vision of homosexuality as a stubbornly real identity nonetheless capable of sustaining the most ambitious theoretical significance. You

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can of course quarrel with Bersani's assertions. But it's impossible to dispute the appeal of his ferociously oscillating argumentative style and its implication that homosexuality has both a social location and a metaphysical prestige—both a content we can recognize and a form that makes it philosophically resonant. (That he managed this tour de force at the nadir of a pandemic that audibly scores his sentences with grief, anger, and disbelief only makes the essay more remarkable.)

Homos is similarly driven on the one hand by an insistence on certain irreducibles of gay existence—as Bersani puts it, "there *is* a 'we'"—and on the other by the claim that sexual identity is a "merely formal arrangement" (42, 61). "Homo-ness," he claims in the most succinct formulation of this tension, "is an anti-identitarian identity" (101). The book's title thus performs a kind of bait and switch. Readers lured by Bersani's audacious use of the schoolyard taunt find the term redefined in the book from social identity to pure pattern; by the time we reach Bersani's conclusion, the word denotes less an identifiable group of people than the formal correspondences by which the world discloses its essential unity; "homos" are the patterns in existence that might help us learn to see otherness as "a seductive sameness" (150). But the colloquial meaning of the title also lingers into this formalist paradise, an inexpungeable reminder of how violently the world enforces bounded and untranscendable identities. No awareness of the replicating patterns structuring existence will save the garden-variety homo from a bloody nose on the playground, or worse. Homosexuality, in other words, has operated in Bersani's work as a double sign: it both holds out the promise of formalist transcendence and insists on its remoteness.[2]

Intriguingly, it is when Bersani is not talking specifically about homosexuality that he can seem to downplay the friction any particular content will exert on such formalizing projects. In the chapter of *The Culture of Redemption* focusing on Marcel Proust, for example, Bersani explores with characteristic incisiveness the tragic vision of psychic life in *À la recherche du temps perdu* as defined by a "willful and anguished pursuit of the truth of desire" (25). But the emotional arc of Bersani's chapter is, oddly enough, upward: he goes on to show that even as the plot of *Recherche* argues for the inevitability of such violent desiring games, the texture of Proust's writing gestures beyond them. "If consciousness in Proust seeks most frequently to go *behind* objects, there is also a move—wholly different in its consequences—*to the side of* objects." This lateral move (which Bersani associates with Proust's "syntactic resources"—that is, with his style) points the epistemologically terrorized and terrorizing Marcel not toward the mirage of the other's truth but toward an awareness of "*phenomena liberated from the obsession with truth*" (26–27). The obsessed thematizations of Proust's novel, in other words, are almost dissolved by their formal containers.

The copresence of tragically fixated content and gorgeously mobile form is characteristic of the privileged objects of Bersani's analytic attention, especially in the work on the visual arts he has cowritten with Ulysse Dutoit. In *Forms of Being*, for example, Bersani and Dutoit show that the central couple in Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt* are playing out a deadening psychodrama to which Godard's editing and scenography are indifferent, so that just when the film's characters are at their most mutually corrosive, Godard's style is teaching us how we might "lose our fascinating and crippling expressiveness" (70). And in the beautiful essay in the same book on Terence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*, Bersani and Dutoit argue that Malick's camera appears uninterested in the battles between characters, and indeed between armies, the film records; Malick's visual vocabulary, replete with near rhymes between the most disparate objects, intimates "an ontology of universal immanence" that makes those bat-

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tles seem irrelevant (169). A similar pattern occurs in Bersani's readings of Henry James's *The Beast in the Jungle*, Caravaggio's paintings, and the films of Alain Resnais, Claire Denis, and Derek Jarman.[3] The formal ingenuity of these works, Bersani has shown, asks us to look to the side of their thematizations. The stunningly inventive formalism of these aesthetic objects provides a model for Bersani's criticism, which similarly directs us to look at the surface of an artifact we have been attempting to look right through. Bersani has given us plenty of showstopping pronouncements, but his most representative sentence might be a simple qualification embedded in the chapter on Thomas Pynchon in *The Culture of Redemption*: "There may, however, be another way to think about this" (189). Like the works he analyzes, Bersani models a certain recursive habit for his readers; he asks us to look again.

Still, the insistence of the pattern makes one wonder: is it just a coincidence that the texts Bersani likes do the thing he likes even as they also show us the thing he doesn't? What does it mean that these texts rehearse at the level of theme precisely the epistemo-psychological scripts their form seems bent on destroying? As we've seen, the sequencing of Bersani's essays often narrativizes this paradox in a surprisingly comic mode, so that the depressing lesson the artwork at first appears to impart gives way to a therapeutic vision of nondestructive relationality. But surely we could also read this story in the other direction, approaching form and content in the reverse order: rather than view the formal elements of his favored works as dematerializing or dedramatizing their thematic elements, couldn't we instead see those contents as responding to the fantasy represented by their form? If we understood the subjects of these works—murderous incomprehension, paranoid desire, warfare, empire, racial fetishism, militarism, genocide—as reacting to the propositions implicitly made by their form, we might have to understand that content as allegorizing the unhappy fate of these formal experiments. This in turn might make these texts look less than optimistic about the intoxicating possibility of remaking relationality that Bersani locates in them. Once we note how powerless even Proust's and Denis's and James's formalisms are to prevent their destructive scripts from careening forward, we may ask whether these texts model a departure from the sadisms of epistemology and identity or whether they argue instead for their inescapability. The prominence of negative formulations in Bersani's work (depsychologizing, designifying, demilitarizing) suggests that the formal inventions of the texts he values may be parasitic on certain contents. If this is true, those resolutely unredeemed contents deserve as much attention as their formal transubstantiations.

It seems significant in this context that homosexuality is at once the topic that most tempts Bersani to what can look like a redemptive formalism and the topic that keeps his work resolutely in touch with what remains untranscendable in psychic and social life. If Bersani's double insistence on the experience of social damage and on the fantasy of achieving distance from that damage sometimes verges on self-contradiction, it is just this fact that makes his work more germane than ever to the contradictions of contemporary queer existence. The current press around male homosexuality, in particular, could scarcely be more schizophrenic. It would be tough to determine, scanning the pages of the *New York Times*, whether gay men are now primarily seen as married, suburban adoptive parents or as drug-addled (and often "down-low") hedonists busy casting off the lessons of safer sex; whether more than a decade of protease inhibitor treatments for HIV infection has released American gay men from the shadow of morbidity or rendered our lives more quietly and permanently medicalized; in short, whether gay life is on the verge of being re-

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deemed from its embarrassments or has been condemned to a different version of them. The overdrawn Manichaeanism of these images doesn't render them any less ideologically potent.[4] Any queer criticism that cares about the vicissitudes of gay male life will have to deal with the effect such incoherent phantasms have on real subjectivities and real communities. Bersani is so relevant now precisely because homosexuality in his work—I am tempted to risk embarrassment and call it the homosexuality *of* his work—has never let us lose sight of those incoherencies.

Notes

1. For one well-known instance, see the audacious first paragraph of Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, on which Bersani comments skeptically in *Homos* (68–69).

2. The status of homosexuality in Bersani's work is most explicitly canvassed in Bersani, Dean, Foster, and Silverman. Bersani specifies there that in his work "the homosexual as a category does have a privileged position heuristically, but not as a social priority" (11). This distinction notwithstanding, it is exactly the sense that homosexuality remains an ethical, political, social, and (especially) rhetorical priority in his writing that I want to emphasize here.

3. On James, see Bersani and Phillips; on Caravaggio, see Bersani and Dutoit, *Caravaggio's Secrets*; on Resnais, see Bersani and Dutoit, *Arts*; on Denis, see Bersani, "Father"; on Jarman, see Bersani and Dutoit, *Caravaggio*.

4. For a diverse set of arguments about the resurgence of unprotected anal sex among gay men, see Halperin; Dean; and Bersani and Phillips. None of these books fully addresses the impact of the protease inhibitor on gay sex in those communities where the drugs are available or the privatization of HIV illness that is one consequence of the effectiveness of antiretroviral treatments. These topics remain strangely underexplored by major queer theorists.

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