theories and methodologies

Broken Connections

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"I CAN'T GO ON, I'LL GO ON." BOTH PARTS OF THIS BLEAK ACKNOWLEDGMENT BY SAMUEL BECKETT'S UNNAMABLE (407) SEEM TO ME APpropriate (if not particularly gracious) responses to the honor of the preceding essays, which grow out of a distinguished 2008 MLA panel on what the program called my "career in writing." First, there is, inevitably, a finalizing or conclusive connotation inherent in both the event and the reference to a "career," a career that, at least for the purposes of the event meant to celebrate it, can only be located behind me. So the only way to avoid the entombment, the modest monumentalizing, unintentionally (I assume) accomplished in these essays is to insist, as Beckett does, that I must go on. If, to continue on another Beckettian note, there has been a career in writing, it has perhaps been because, somehow, I have not succeeded in failing, or I have at least (or at most) insufficiently failed. The Beckettian voice's exasperation at never having failed enough has always seemed to me to have something to do with the experience of the energizing effect of failures in language, an energy that prevents a voice from entering, and being locked into, the presumed history of a presumed culture.

Imagine, then, my delight when Jane Gallop announced her frustration and anger at my having failed in the text of *The Freudian Body* to repeat, even once (except, gratuitously, in Latin, of all things), the words of my title. It has been some years since I have been called a "fucking tease," and I fully sympathize with Jane's disappointment at not having gotten, as she puts it, the body she was promised (a disappointment we have surely all had at some point in our lives . . .). Failure here implies infidelity: what I say in the book is in some way unfaithful to its title. To specify failure as a failure to be faithful especially pleases me since, having once written an essay called "Against Monogamy" (I was referring to a sexual and affective cultural ideal), I would be pleased to be intellectually faithful to my polemic against sexual faithfulness, to be seen as having promiscuously forgotten my titular promises and, more importantly, my early positions or ideas in my later work. I refer, most notably, to my apparent betrayal—a vir-

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tue extolled in the Genet section of *Homos*—of the Laplanchian notion of *ébranlement*, of sexual shattering, by my more recent modulation of masochism into another, less dramatic, this time socially viable version of ego disidentification. I mean by the latter the milder sensual pleasure of discovering our inaccurate self-replications in the world, the aesthetically pleasing correspondences between the world and multiple partial aspects of our subjecthood. Aesthetically pleasing, and also inherent in the aesthetic. Tim Dean has emphasized in his work how aesthetic experience may generate traumatic or shattering effects comparable with those of sexuality. In his contribution to this series of essays, Dean has drawn my attention to a remarkable passage in "Infantile Sexuality" where Freud, speaking of "[t]he sexually exciting effect of many emotions which are in themselves unpleasurable," specifies a source for "sensations of this kind" in an "imaginary world, in a book or in a play." As Dean comments, "Not only does Freud claim that sexuality may be provoked by objects that are unrecognizable as either oedipally derived or, indeed, erotic in any way; he claims further that it may be provoked by objects—or, more precisely, experiences—that are recognizably aesthetic."

This attention in my recent work to the aesthetic seems to me largely the result of my collaboration with Ulysse Dutoit on the visual arts. Our emphasis on the complex immediacy of perception is another instance of the phenomenological inclination Michael Lucey finds already present in my early work on the novel, in my focus on "the moment in which a subjectivity apprehends the phenomenal world and on the conditions, structures, and effects of that apprehension." In a similar vein, Kaja Silverman emphasizes what she describes as my responsiveness to a "call . . . from the phenomenal world." She formulates that responsiveness as a question I recognize as central not only to Dutoit's and my work on painting and film but also to my work in queer theory: "[W]hat are the perceptual circumstances that would make it possible for us to correspond with other beings not only formally but also psychically?" *The Forms of Violence*, on ancient Assyrian bas-reliefs, and *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* trace the formal correspondences evoked in this question, and *Homos* seeks to address psychic correspondences through its attempt to prioritize sameness over difference.

I referred a moment ago to titular promises perhaps not always kept. Something similar could be said about several of the first sentences of my essays and books. In the course of rather passively reflecting on some recognizably "significant" topic (intimacy, the history of knowledge and of subjectivity, the relation between having sex and being social), I am often struck—it's a kind of mental lightning effect—with what I know has to be the first sentence of my next piece of writing. I get very attached to these sentences before writing anything else (some examples: "There is a big secret about sex: most people don't like it," or "The vagina is a logical defect in nature," or "Nobody wants to be called a homosexual," or "Is love compatible with intimacy?"), and I develop a terrible feeling of fidelity to that sentence, as if the book or essay has to be written because I've been hit, or infected, by that sentence (to adopt a term used by E. M. Forster, who described the writing of *A Passage to India* as a "voluntary surrender to infection" [qtd. in Stallybrass 26]). But the attempted fidelity can involve a certain betrayal of the subject that it presumably announces or introduces. Things get started with what I at any rate feel as a formal shock, and I've come to hope that the effect of that shock on readers (if they feel it as I do) will be to make it very difficult for them to reduce my writing to what they (and I, for that matter) think it is "about."

Inconsistencies of thought, conceptual betrayals: it is as if I were describing the rewards I have found in my readings of Freud. Freud's interpretations and speculations

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throughout his work—in particular, in the metapsychological papers, as well as, most notably, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (which Jean Laplanche has characterized as "un texte en lambeaux"—a text in fragments, disconnected parts [196])—frequently have a certain incoherent connectedness that has always seemed to me central to Freud's genius. I don't mean only that he must take into account the flouting of conscious logic in the moves of unconscious fantasy and of primary process thinking. More interestingly, in taking those moves into account Freud's interpretations remain faithful to them: his conceptual sense fails to make sense. The Freudian text frequently demolishes its own arguments. I'm thinking especially of the fragility of the dualisms to which Freud always remained attached: the invasion of the death drive by the pleasure principle in the very text meant to demonstrate that there is something "beyond the pleasure principle" and the collapsing of the central opposition between sexuality and aggressiveness, while that opposition is being elaborated, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. There is also the tenuousness of the differences between presumably distinct drives or psychic categories, especially between sadism and masochism, and the further, always threatened merging of those drives into narcissism. Language comes too late; it depends on distinctions and intervals of which what we might call the psychoanalytic subject is ignorant. The heroically impossible project of psychoanalysis is to theorize an untheorizable psyche, and the exceptional nature of the Freudian (and, I would add, Lacanian) text in the history of psychoanalysis is that it allows unreadable pressures to infiltrate the readable, thus creating a type of readability at odds with how we have been taught to read while also accounting for that which, in the psychic structure, is anterior to all readable accounting for. The Freudian text performs the blockages, the mergings, the incoherence inherent in the "discipline" Freud invented.

Aware perhaps of the strangeness of one of the several strange transitions he makes between his description and his interpretations of the symptoms in the case described in the 1910 essay "A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men," Freud writes, "With a slight change of meaning, such as is easily effected in the unconscious and is comparable to the way in which in consciousness concepts shade into one another, rescuing his mother takes on [for the type of man being discussed] the significance of giving her a child or making a child for her—needless to say, one like himself" (173). Semantic discontinuities are characteristic of the conscious as well as of the unconscious mind. These discontinuities also occur in the best psychoanalytic writing. By "best" I mean writing that, like art, traumatizes us into participating in, and even helping to invent, new modes of connectedness. Freud's arguments, Stéphane Mallarmé's poetry, and Jean-Luc Godard's films are three powerful, if very different, exemplifications of traumatic syntactic reinventions. Can the not especially logical "logic" of such a syntax of thought be discursively elaborated? My interest in the challenge posed by this question takes the form in my current work of an attempt to think psychoanalytically about psychoanalytic thinking. Psychoanalytic subjectivity *is* that continuously practiced yet rarely recognized type of self-reflexiveness.

The divided self of the human subject is constituted by foreign objects. There is the untheorizable psyche, and there is the language that belongs to none of us but that we use as our principal means of self-understanding. To write is perhaps to work toward the coinciding of these two foreign objects in what we call our subjectivity. In writing, we seek to perform the improbable impersonal identity that would be the conjunction of "objects" intrinsically unavailable for identitarian projects. There are moments when language embraces a certain rhythm in ourselves, a rhythm at once mental and physical. For example, at the

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beginning of chapter 3 ("The Gay Daddy") in *Homos*, I feel I've made almost palpable in the writing a rhythm of movement toward Foucault (toward the things he talked about in an interview—gay love and gay sex) and away from him (from his desexualizing of the gay threat). It's a fluctuation, a sort of respiration almost, that's fast, then slow, changing its pace and its spacing, coercing language into embracing its undulations. It comes out in that particular passage as humor or irony or distancing, to use a series of recognizable critical terms that don't exactly describe the specific coincidence between the rhythms of body and that which is foreign to the body. Language, despite its intrinsic foreignness (its indifference to us as individual subjects), momentarily becomes simply like the clothing of our most intimate rhythms; there is a striking concordance between a "system" of untheorizable psychic respiration and the system of language. This correspondence might be the intimate foundation of my interest in what Ulysse and I have been calling the correspondence of forms.

Finally, this kind of success with language is not entirely inconsistent with what I called earlier, in connection with Beckett, the energies released by failure. But then of course I might be settling things, making or pretending to make definitive statements, whereas I prefer to be guided by Robert Walser's "fascination of not uttering something absolutely" (qtd. in Agamben 60) and by Lacan's claim in the *Psychoses* seminar that "the principal difference between [so-called normal people] and the insane is perhaps nothing other than this: [recognizing] the number of things . . . that it's truly [our] fundamental occupation not to take seriously" (123)—first and foremost in the intellectual life, I would add, the notion that we know and are transmitting something bizarrely called truth. David Kurnick suggests that my "most representative sentence" may be a contentless qualification in my discussion of Thomas Pynchon in *The Culture of Redemption*: "There may, however, be another way to think about this." Try again, go on, even though it may be senseless to do so. I ask you, I ask myself, as Kurnick puts it, "to look again"—or, as I am now inclined to formulate it, connect again.

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