theories and methodologies

Aesthetic Apprehension and the Novel

MICHAEL LUCEY

EVEN THOUGH THE RANGE OF AESTHETIC OBJECTS THAT HAVE CAPTURED LEO BERSANI'S ATTENTION OVER THE YEARS IS WIDE, THE NOVEL REmains one of the more privileged objects among them and could arguably be taken as the point of departure for many of his reflections. His attention has been on the modern French novel in particular, from Honoré de Balzac to Marcel Proust and Samuel Beckett—Proust and Beckett being two of the writers to whom Bersani has returned with the most frequency and inventiveness over the years. In the 1960s Bersani began elaborating a critical agenda for the reading of novels in books such as *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and Art* (1965) and *Balzac to Beckett: Center and Circumference in French Fiction* (1970). His critical references in these books are also mainly French or francophone. He positions himself in various kinds of opposition to literary critics of the time like Jean Starobinski, Georges Poulet, and Jean-Pierre Richard, as well as the early Roland Barthes. This is also the moment when a certain number of other now familiar French thinkers were beginning to be read in the United States, and so *Balzac to Beckett* opens with a favorable reference to Michel Foucault, the author of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, and Jacques Derrida, the author of *Of Grammatology*. Bersani notes that these two books represent "in recent years . . . the most brilliant analyses of the history and consequence of those habits of thought" that believe that "significance precedes experience, which is both expressive and deceptive and which therefore needs to be decoded or interpreted" (4). For Bersani it is a failure of critical imagination to assume that present experience comes to be meaningful solely or primarily in relation to prior structures of meaning, which are simply rehearsed or repeated, instantiated or exemplified, by way of new experience. One could do worse than imagine that at the core of all Bersani's work is an effort to challenge the priority or precedence given by many writers and critics to significance over experience, and it is in this light that an association with some of the critical impulses (impulses that strive after yet-to-be-determined futures) of Derrida and Foucault

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makes a certain sense. Starobinski, Poulet, and Richard are often grouped together as "phenomenological critics," critics who view a literary work as the expression of the patterns and structures by means of which a particular consciousness apprehends the world and who view the critical task as that of revealing the patterns or structures of apprehension that characterize a particular artistic subjectivity and allow it to produce a particular image of the world. Bersani's disagreement with these critics had to do with their focus on the "secret thematic selves which inform the writer's work but which the language of the work does not explicitly express." Thus, "the writer's self" is equated to the work's "principal theme," and such criticism places an emphasis on "*centers* . . . from which particular performances 'radiate' and *back to which* the critic draws the work" (*Balzac* 16–17). Bersani's preference, in opposition to this "centripetal" critical impulse, has been for "centrifugal" forces, both in art and in criticism: "My commitment to . . . open-ended, projective, and self-contesting art . . . will be expressed by a critical emphasis on those occasions in fiction which tend to disintegrate theme" (19).

And yet Bersani is obviously, in everything he has written, a phenomenologically inclined thinker, intently focused on the moment in which a subjectivity apprehends the phenomenal world and on the conditions, structures, and effects of that apprehension. Even if he initially elaborates his antithematic critical commitment, which has remained salient throughout his career in writing, to distinguish himself from phenomenological critics such as Poulet or Starobinski, his work could be said to be related to theirs at least as much as it is to the work of Foucault or Derrida, whose projects were explicitly elaborated as an alternative to phenomenology as such and were intended to shift critical attention away from acts of subjective apprehension and toward, in Foucault's case, methodologies for the study of the structures of discursive meaning or, in Derrida's case, a critique of the philosophical biases that imagine certain kinds of phenomenal truth to have priority over the ongoing production of meaning in signs and in writing. The study of discourse, the structure of utterances, and theories of signs and signification are not prioritized in Bersani's work. It is thus one of the fascinating and delightfully frustrating paradoxes of that work that it can be simultaneously so repeatedly engaged with Foucault's thought and so fundamentally incompatible with it.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault imagined his work as involving the excavation and display of arrays of cultural knowledge from the near present, the recent past, or the distant past. Such arrays enabled, formed the background for, given acts of meaning production. Putting these arrays on display rendered possible a perception of the contingency of those acts of meaning production and also of the subject of those acts. He writes, "We must grasp the utterance in the exact specificity of its occurrence; determine its conditions of existence, fix at least its limits, establish its correlations with other statements that may be connected with it, and show what other forms of statement it excludes" (28). Bersani's work, in its searching focus on the relation of the perceiving subject (*self* is the word he tends to use) to the world, ends up taking on a more transcendental cast than one finds in Foucault. For Bersani the history of the French novel tells the story of a transcendental subject.

If Proust has been, for Bersani, an inescapable figure, one to whom he has returned over and over again, it is because Proust's long novel represents for him a key moment in a possible history of relations between the self and the world that the French novel, as it moves from Balzac through Proust to Beckett, both enacts and theorizes. Bersani is always interested in novels both for what they enact and as theoretical ventures in their own right. His fascination with Proust, from Bersani's first book onward, has to do with the

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consequences of what he has described as "the narrator's extreme uncertainty about the relationship between the self and the world" (*Marcel Proust* 19–20)—not just the narrator's uncertainty, we should add, but also his anxiety. For a self's relation to the world is, it often seems in Bersani's vision, transcendentally anxious. Novels (realist novels in particular, and Bersani considers Proust and Beckett novelists who respond to the realist tradition and perhaps bring it to an end) enact a foundational subjective anxiety in the face of the world. They sometimes also theorize aspects of that anxiety.

In a recent essay called "Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject," on Pierre Michon's novel *La Grande Beune* (translated as *The Origin of the World*), Bersani describes the anxiety that characterizes a self's relation to the world as tied to "the horror of undifferentiated being" or the "unimaginable imagination of an identityless miasma, of something before articulated being, which the human can only 'think' as before the realization of any being whatsoever, as something from which the peace of inorganic stasis, of the death drive fully satisfied, might rescue us" (166). Michon's novel, in Bersani's account, tells the tale of an aesthetic subject's use of the imaginative faculty to cope with the apparently unavoidable anxiety that structures any confrontation with the world:

> This is the power of the aesthetic subject, fashioning from the "miasma" of a psyche that, like all human psyches, can be at once everything and nothing, its individuating responsiveness to the world. . . . The unconscious never is; it is perhaps an essentially unthinkable, intrinsically unrealizable reserve of human being—a dimension of virtuality rather than of psychic depth—from which we connect to the world, not as subject to object, but as a continuation of a specific syntax of being. (169)

Bersani takes the novels that hold his attention sometimes as examples of an aesthetic subject at work (e.g., in his way of reading Balzac) and at other times, as in his approach to Michon's novel, as representing the travails of the aesthetic subject in its confrontation with the world in order to offer a theoretical consideration of that confrontation. Novels are thus sometimes the occasion for us as readers to reflect theoretically on our relation as perceiving subjects to our world and at other times the occasion on which we vicariously experience a relation to the world offered to us by the novelist as world maker. Across his career, Bersani will become increasingly attentive to the different ways in which "fantasy," a universal faculty individually instantiated and structured in individuated ways within each aesthetic subject, holds the connection between the perceiving subject and the world. An elaboration of the concept of fantasy—and of possible rearrangements of the way fantasy mediates between subjectivity and the world—thus becomes the keystone of Bersani's critical enterprise, and fantasy also becomes the object of his phenomenological critical attention as he approaches any aesthetic artifact:

> Fantasy is . . . on the threshold between an invisible (and necessarily hypothetical) inner world and the world present to our senses. . . . If fantasy is a major site of our connectedness to the world, it is not an act that touches or changes the world. It represents the terms in which the world inheres in the fantasizing subject, terms that can change as our position in the world changes. An undifferentiated unconscious lends itself to diverse representations of the interface between the moving subject and a world whose relational map is itself continuously modified by the moves of all the units—including the human units—that constitute it. ("Psychoanalysis" 171)

Throughout Bersani's writing career, this interest in fantasy has sustained his engagement with psychoanalytic theory, even as his insistence on the mobility or lability of fantasy

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has fueled his ongoing quarrel with certain foundationally reactionary aspects of psychoanalysis. In his early books on Proust and on the modern French novel, Bersani inveighed against the critical impulse to approach the literary work as an enigma to which criticism would produce a key. Instead, he asked, "[C]an literary criticism offer a model for discussions of experience which elucidate sense from and within the visible gestures of behavior (literary and nonliterary) rather than from the supposed antecedents or sources of those gestures?" (*Balzac* 6). That is, combining the idiom of his early work with that of his late work, can we imagine approaching the fantasy instantiated in an aesthetic object, and can we imagine our way of being affected by that object and its fantasy structure as linked, not to the past or to structures of identity, but to the unpredictably mobile investments in a relation to the world that is in important ways yet to be determined? As Bersani's work advances, it becomes more and more clear how for him this question of establishing a subjective orientation to the world with sufficient mobility to respect the difference the present and the future might hold becomes a primarily ethical question. Much of his work thus turns on an investigation of how the act of responding to and establishing critical relations to aesthetic objects can, in and of itself, form an ethical relation to the world.

One could say, in fact, that the history of the French novel as Bersani tells it, from Balzac by way of Proust (always stuck in the middle of things) to Beckett or to André Gide or to Michon (the story as he has told it has several endings), is an objective correlative for the process of an ethical overcoming of the potential violence that arises from the perceiving subject's anxious relation to the world. In this allegorical literary history that Bersani has constructed across his career, Balzac represents (I exaggerate slightly) the novelistic example of nearly unredeemed anxiety. He writes, "Balzac's world runs the risk of disappearing in order to serve the narrator's appetite for possession. The writing of fiction provides ideal occasions for indulging that appetite, but Balzac's novelistic experiments are also attempts to imagine ways of saving the world from his own voraciousness" (*Balzac* 30). In another iteration of the same point, Bersani states that the "hope implicit in Balzac's way of organizing novelistic material is that a tightly structured fiction will impose its order on (and therefore 'convert') the devouring appetites which are the subject of that fiction" (240). The devouring appetites he speaks of are both those of the novelist and those of the novelist's characters. Like Balzac's characters, we, readers as well as novelists, "modulate our aggressiveness toward the world by patiently testing the world as a field for self-dramatization" (68). *The Lily of the Valley*, the Balzac novel in question here, dramatizes "the lovers' search for containing forms" for their desire; that search "could be thought of as a psychological metaphor for problems of literary creation" (71). Balzac stands for the potential violence produced by the struggle for too much formal coherence—in life and literature. What Bersani advocates for is, as he put it in *Balzac to Beckett*, "the pursuit of *in*coherence"; in modern art he champions what "can . . . be thought of as the most dramatic aspect of an attack against art's complicity with cultural myths about hidden realities as the designer of experience" (12). As a reader of novels, he calls attention to "a centrifugal pull which opens up the novel by multiplying the rays of interest *away* from the center," and he offers what he calls "a provisional definition of freedom: the ability to respond to particular occasions in ways too elusive or diversified to be covered by any interpretation of them" (19). Such a freedom can be found in Proust alongside all the enforcements of coherence through the keying of experience backward to meaningful structures that characterizes the Balzacian novel. If, Bersani writes in *A Future for Astyanax*, we can learn a negative lesson

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from Balzac about "some of the ways in which the nineteenth-century novel has trained us to be compulsive pursuers of significant design in fiction" (52), from Proust we can learn "the *appeal* of the fragmented self" (85). For Bersani "Proust is unique among the writers I've been discussing in that the self-diffusions of desire are not merely a source of anguish in his work; he also exploits them as an inexhaustible source of nourishment for his work" (84). They are a source of anguish or anxiety, but not merely that. The Proustian narrator is sometimes riven with a fear or an aggressiveness similar to that found in the Balzacian novel, the victim of "a fearful fantasy of losing the self unless it can be permanently fixed in some external picture" (*Proust* 6). The anxiety that fantasy causes creates the violent idea for the narrator of *À la recherche du temps perdu* that "the condition for knowledge is a total suppression of the differences between the self and the world" (32). Fortunately, this is not the whole story. Here is the other half: "The narrator's own performance in *À la Recherche* undermines the anxiety provoked in him by the spectacle of a self 'floating' among desires which can't be absorbed into a single structure of character. But this happy lack allows the Proustian narrator to experiment endlessly with the metamorphoses of desire" (*Future* 87).

I've suggested that Beckett, Michon, and Gide stand at the ends of different versions of this Bersanian history of the novel, and the authors turn out to be three rather different endpoints. But they share an ability to direct Bersani's attention away from novelistic objects altogether. Consider, for instance, this noteworthy description of Beckett's and Gustave Flaubert's writing in *Balzac to Beckett*:

> The disappearance of the self in "the words of others" is, for Flaubert and Beckett, the horror from which they would retreat into silence. They believe in a reality prior to the "traces" of reality made by language, which is to say that they aspire to be guilty of that mimetic art so ferociously criticized today. Unable to believe that a viable existence can be successfully forged from words which can obviously never correspond exactly to a preexistent reality or inner essence, they would punish language for its inexpressiveness by beating it into insignificance. (330)

Bersani's early writing places Beckett's work at the end of a trajectory of anxiety and aggression focused on the "something before or behind language" that language tries to master and apprehend (328). Later writings, such as the chapter devoted to Beckett in *Arts of Impoverishment*, which Bersani cowrote with Ulysse Dutoit, take Beckett's work not as an endpoint but as a point of departure: "There is no moment of self-identification that is not also a self-multiplication or dispersal. Thus the very nostalgia for a final, nondispersed 'I' is a function of a self-originating dispersal. This can be put differently: there is no way to escape company. The human subject is incomplete unless its completeness is undone" (75). The seed for this reflection on "relationality," which is the hallmark of the second half of Bersani's career, can surely be found in the elaboration in texts such as *A Future for Astyanax* of "the strangely humanizing potential of a sado-masochistic sexuality which shatters the self out of a dangerous security about its own sexual identity" (9). This interest in salutary self-shattering—elaborated across a number of celebrated books and articles—corresponds provocatively to an increasing interest in visual aesthetic objects rather than narrative ones, as well as to an interest in relationality that displaces the interest in anxiety and aggression. It seems to me that as a result of this displacement, in certain later moments when Bersani returns his critical attention to novelistic prose something has shifted. The difference between the attitude and approach to Beckett found in *Balzac to Beckett* and those found in *Arts of Impoverishment* is one sign of this shift. Another is a moment in the article on Michon, where Bersani notes,

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"While a certain degree of anxiety about an unmastered world is inevitable, it is also true . . . that we correspond to the world in ways that don't necessitate or imply the world's suppression" ("Psychoanalysis" 174). Thank goodness! Bersani's recent speculations about nonanxious aesthetic responses are immensely suggestive, poetic even, referring to "families of singularity that connect us to all the forms that have, as it were, always anticipated our coming, our presence"; to "correspondences"; to the eschewal of "psychologically motivated communication," which is to be replaced with "families of form" (168). Similar gestures can be found a bit earlier, in a remarkable passage in *Homos* on Gide's *The Immoralist*, where Bersani wrote:

> A potentially universal visibility reduces the visibility of an individual, bounded body. These correspondences of form, texture, color, and volume trace designs of sameness in our relations with the universe; our bodily being "touches" multiple other surfaces to which it is drawn, not necessarily by desire but perhaps primordially by formal affinities that diagram our extensions, the particular families of forms to which we belong. (120–21)

Interestingly, in this particular way of apprehending a novel, something of what Bersani had always assumed to be the novelistic has been left behind for something else that is here referred to as visual. Over the years, the novel has lost its centrality in Bersani's ongoing critical reflection on the significance and modalities of aesthetic apprehension. Perhaps its repetitive relation to an anxiety that was itself perhaps more parochial and less transcendental than he led us to believe has also been disrupted for him. I wonder what would happen if he were to write about Balzac again at this point. It could be that now neither the novel nor Balzac nor the Balzacian novel would have to be apprehended in the same anxious way.

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