

Less

We can, and should, will ourselves to be less than what we are; an expansive diminishing of being is the activity of a psychic utopia.

—“I Can Dream, Can’t I?” 69

*B*ersani’s desideratum, which amounts not only to a call for becoming “less than what we are” but also to a confident announcement that this autoimmune destitution, notwithstanding its utopian quality, is hardly out of reach, appears in “I Can Dream, Can’t I?,” a previously published essay that was later collected in *Thoughts and Things* (2015). This compact book has a retrospective feel to it, to be sure, although Bersani’s return to long-standing fascinations is indistinguishable from his irrepressible anticipation of “new relational modes” (“Response”), recalling Foucault’s hope for “new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force” (“Friendship”) that disentangle themselves from the all too often destructive psychic drama of lost subjects and contested objects. In its focus and methodology, *Thoughts and Things* exemplifies the dynamic churn of what Bersani calls, in the context of his reading of temporality in Hegel and Freud, “the past’s absorption into a continuously becoming present” (“I Can Dream” 75). Bersani is adamant that we give ourselves the opportunity to imagine novel, pacific expressions of existence, so much so that being less—fostering forms of attention and admiration that are not quickened by the need to quell the

otherness of the other—can sometimes be likened to a form of quarantine restraint, even though confusing “self-abnegation,” as he sometimes puts it, with the mortification of the flesh is arguably the furthest thing from his prodigiously sensuous critical mind. What do relations, including erotic relations, both with oneself and with others, look and feel like, he writes in an earlier text, that are “*uncontaminated* by a psychology of desire,” which is to say “unaccompanied by an essentially doomed and generally anguished interrogation of the other’s desire”? (*Homos* 123). The truth, of course, is that there cannot be any single answer to that ethically consequential question, which explains the jubilant restlessness of the oeuvre, as Bersani searches for evidence of practices and possibilities of subtraction in which the subject yields its stake in identity so that it might savor extensions and pieces of itself in a world that is no longer merely a hostile ocean in which it faces but two choices, sink or swim.

“To circulate within sameness we must first of all welcome—to use a favorite Beckettian term—lessness,” Bersani says in an interview: “Great art—contrary to all the critical cant about how richly signifying it is—makes available the always-somewhat-frightening *jouissance* of lessness” (“Pregnant” 157). Alarming as the pleasure taken in trying not to be only ourselves may be, it is, in Bersani’s hands, also an underappreciated entitlement, almost a kind of right, and a calling, akin to what he captures in his essay’s throwdown of a title, “‘I Can Dream, Can’t I?’” (itself a campy riff on the name of a schmaltzy ballad sung by the Andrews sisters). Practicing hospitality toward psychic ephemera, not across a chasm of difference but instead as part of the ontological commons of “an *undivided self*” (“‘I Can Dream’” 63), is but one example of what he calls—among many other names—“self-divestiture” or “self-dispersal,” meaning, the subsidence of the prestige that is routinely accorded to the subject of desire, the result of which is to let the myriad states of human and nonhuman being—thoughts and things and everything in between—through which we flow and which flow through us jostle for attention. What catches Bersani’s eye, and ours, are the unexpected adjacencies, curious repetitions, and inexplicable likenesses that come from ceding the distinctness of personhood to the fluidity of being—a phenomenon modeled for him in some of Jean-Luc Godard’s films, in which the erratic *mise-en-scène* is mostly the means by which the director gives audiences to see incomplete clones and suggestive samenesses without any underlying significance, immersing the eye in visual vehicles that are in constant motion because they are unanswerable to any tenor. The strange propulsiveness of Godard’s films, Bersani suggests, comes not

from the narrative but from registering the flashes of sameness by which that narrative is punctuated and to which they have a passing allegiance (“Far” 81–83). There are many moments in Bersani in which the enjoyment of (in)congruities, and of discovering versions of oneself repeated outside of oneself, seem mostly aesthetic in kind, but that reading would grossly underestimate the unerringly ethical impetus of his work, his commitments, finally, to the alleviation of suffering.

“[T]he human subject can be more than a psychological subject,” Bersani writes with typical matter-of-factness (Bersani and Phillips, *Intimacies* 120), but it takes the abatement or perhaps the letting wither of the latter for the continuously discontinuous excess of the former to become legible and pleasurable: the energies of expansiveness and diminishment are always inextricably bound together in his work. A large part of the agreeable surprise of reading Bersani is seeing, as if for the first time, what was always taking place in the ontological background but obscured by the atomic light of the embattled and entangled distinctiveness of desirous identities, one’s own and that of others. That so much “homo-ness” remains unseen or unexperienced or misunderstood says a great deal about the blanketing dominance of the policed division of things as they are, variously characterized by Bersani as “Cartesian” or “psychoanalytical” or “biopolitical.” Yet right away it is worth remarking the underdiscussed, hard-to-describe, yet unmistakably *heartening* quality of Bersani’s work, the ways in which his counterintuitive, sometimes seemingly outlandish or paradoxical claims about human beings, which include some scandalous opening sentences, invite neither gestures of virile self-overcoming nor improbable acts of psychic or social mutation, but, quite to the contrary, rather unobtrusive and unsolemn practices of fading or looking or stepping away, without regret, from the demands that at least three interlocking regimes of subjectivity otherwise make on us and of us. The odds appear to be stacked against us becoming less than what we are, but you would not necessarily know that reading Bersani. When lessening happens or is allowed to occur, it invariably happens under the sign of joy and uncertainty, not shattering loss from which we seek compensation or redemption, often at great cost to ourselves and others. It matters that these scenes of subtraction are in their own way mundane, exceptionally unexceptional: experiencing a dream as contiguous with waking life and as one way of being-in-the-world among many; or chatting idly at a party and finding delicious respite not only in not being only oneself but also in being given over to the impersonality of the murmurations of the gathering, the ebbs and flows that make a fête more than

the sum of its parts. Other unremarkable scenes come to mind, including one to which I will return in a moment: a beloved grandson playing a game by himself and of his own invention, and in that game quietly and calmly protesting his grandfather's mad attempt to impose another identity on him. It makes sense for a thinker who praised the "strangely undemanding" nature of "Gidean homosexuality," "almost to the point of being indistinguishable from a homophobic rejection of gay sex" (*Homos* 121), to ask something similarly doable and even quotidian of his readers. One gets the sense—and this is a source of the encouragement of which I am speaking—that the turn toward becoming less is considerably less trying than always being required and failing not only to be what we are (according to the awful dictum, "whatever you do, you keep being you") but also to be more than what we are. One does not need to be a psychologist or a sociologist to see the mayhem and exhaustion that this insomniac alertness leaves in its wake. If there are diseases of despair, surely part of their etiology lies in finding yourself trapped in a psyche that is driven endlessly toward the outside world, including the outside that is within, in violent, appropriative, and sadistic ways. Given the relief and release from this vigilance that lessness offers, the question is not so much "How on earth is it possible to will ourselves to be less?" as "For god's sake, why aren't we less more often?" And yet, Bersani describes his particular practice of care of the self and the will to freedom in terms that never feel as unlikely as the surrounding culture, rooted as it is in "the collusion [one wants also to say "the *collision*"] of ego-identities" (Bersani and Phillips, *Intimacies* 117), should make them seem. If there is a "psychic utopia" to be had, so it appears, it is its nearness not its farness that is at once tantalizing, problematic, and promising. To be sure, lessening what we are is not selflessness, which only orients the self toward a more refined version of itself, the way that an ascetic denial of the flesh, no matter how self-destructive, measures itself against a higher form of life. In the passage from "I Can Dream, Can't I?" that I am briefly considering here, the ontological register of Bersani's language is therefore telling: "*what* we are," that is, the being that will be desertified by the "will," is precisely not "*who* we are," not what he elsewhere calls, and always with considerable suspicion, "personality" (*Future* 174, 214). Moreover, for Bersani "should" implies "can": as in Kant, what is necessary and obligated must also "find it feasible" (*wohl thunlich finde*), neither impossible nor to be put off to some nonexistent date (Kant, "What" 18; *Gessammelte* 8: 146). So the problem is not that one day, through some austere tremendous effort, we shall overcome ourselves, but that, in myriad ways that we might not grasp in real

time and probably should not grasp (since the grabby concept and handsy psyche are precisely what must be set aside, making room for pleasure of nondifference), we have *already* lessened ourselves . . . and might therefore do so again: standing before a painting and letting it silently insist upon its haecceity, its independence from its ostensible occasion; savoring the anonymity of the comings and goings of intimacy with another and with the other that is ourselves; pausing to “caress” an itinerant thought or wayward feeling or unconscious impulse rather than seeking to yoke these impersonal ephemera to a personalized thinker; trusting in the chance that sometimes the aesthetic experience renders us porous and extensive, and because of that we are liable to encounter ourselves or rather pieces of ourselves in unexpected locales, often far from home and that change the very idea of what it might mean to be at home; letting unexpected contiguities, incongruous repetitions, and incomprehensible likenesses *be* without an irritable reaching after fact and reason. To be sure, with Bersani, the stakes remain high—psychic, existential, ontological, and indeed, in the case of “Far Out,” cosmological in kind (since the essay begins by considering the star-stuff of which you and I are made, and then denies that it is doing any such thing [77]). Bersani speaks as unapologetically about *being* and what was once called “*die Seinsfrage*” with the same frankness that North American thinkers talk, albeit with much more solemnity, about “rhetoric” or “history” or “affect.” But “the expansive diminishing of being” to which he refers in “I Can Dream, Can’t I?,” and in so many other moments in his oeuvre, is mostly a matter of an emphatically unemphatic taking leave rather than an assertive abstinence that would only reaffirm the command of the self over itself. In other words, being less also means making less of becoming less. The “will” that Bersani evokes, which he doesn’t hesitate to give a full ethical charge (“We can, and *should* will ourselves [. . .]”), is not willfulness, not fractious, chthonic, and scrappy, but something closer to Kant’s notion of the “good will” (*Groundwork* 7), an impetus—strictly speaking, irreducible to conscious volition and perhaps only ambiguously human—that casts the subject into the welter of the world, where it may or may not discover other good wills, other versions or repetitions of itself, while also liberating the subject from the expectations of productivity and effectivity that bind who we are or imagine ourselves to be to what we do or accomplish. It is enough to be the creature who can and should be less, who can and should abstain from the censorious lesson that schools us into believing that the flip side of wanting to be who we are is the terror that we might be less and need to be less.

Bersani's work never lacks for terms for lessness. Let me count the ways: surrender, subtraction, disappearance, retraction, impoverishment, debasement, dehumanization, desertification, restriction, refusal, dereliction, renunciation, elimination, deprivation. And then there are all the selves subjected to this force of inhibition: self-divestiture, self-dismissal, self-abnegation, self-dispersal, self-containment, self-abdication, in addition to the deconstructed self and demolished self, not to mention the subjects that are self-alienating, self-critical, self-explosive, and self-concealing. Bersani seems to have taken a kind of perverse pleasure not only in ringing these changes on the rhetoric of lessening but also embracing new terms, including "leastening" (*Arts* 82), a portmanteau that he borrows from late Beckett. Why? Briefly, three possibilities come to mind. First, these terms and turns—and there are many more—are synonymous but not exactly substitutable; to borrow a favored term from Bersani and Dutoit, they are "inaccurate replications" of each other, together forming a "nonidentitarian sameness" ("Conversation" 15) that tells an understory about the myriad, granular modulations for which the work of lessness ceaselessly calls. Second, their insistence—the cumulative massing of their presence in his writing while also evoking a particular kind of absence—stands as a complex metonym for the insistence of Bersani's and Dutoit's combined critical voice. They explore, often in exquisite detail, writers and painters whose artistic practice vividly enacts what it means to be less than who and what they are: for example, Rothko's Houston chapel paintings reduce to "the peace of sameness from which the individuating event has all but disappeared, the peace of the undifferentiated" (*Arts* 138); and the syntax of Beckett's *Worstword Ho* is overcome by "rhymes and alliteration that reduce the text itself to a linguistic 'unlessenable least'" (*Arts* 83). Rothko and Beckett, for whom Bersani and Dutoit seem to have had a special affiliation, remind us that lessening the spell of individuation and difference can and should have profound implications for the form and substance of that subject's expressivity. In the case of Rothko, the artist is praised for bringing the image asymptotically up to the point of a near degree zero legibility, as if one could draw what Derrida calls "the stroke without thickness [. . .] the absolutely pure stroke," indifferent to legibility because of the ever retreating origin of it ("Drawing" 100). But these gestures of restraint are not for "Bersani" or "Dutoit," for whom criticism remains criticism, that is, mostly immune, at least at the level of form and genre, to the effects of the subtraction of subjectivity and the overflow of being that it so well describes. Unless of course their combined authorship—in several texts—could be said to model a form

of dispersive, energetic, and apportioned lessening of the author-function. Still, as I say, their criticism reads like criticism, which is especially curious given Bersani's point that "[t]he very word 'criticism,' with its implications of distance and judgement, might make us forget the centrality of the body in our experience of art" (Bersani and Dutoit, "Pregnant" 125). Bersani bears close and careful witness to Caravaggio's "ontological laboratory" (Bersani and Dutoit, *Caravaggio's* 59, 63) without, however, becoming one of its experimental subjects. *Thoughts and Things*, no more than any of Bersani's texts, is not *Glas* or *A Thousand Plateaus* or *The Step Not Beyond*, books that self-consciously divest themselves of their bookishness in the presence of conundrums that invite the eruption of being less. Perhaps part of the many futures of Bersani's work will include reading his work like he approaches Caravaggio: attentive to the ways in which a certain "Bersani" resists disappearing into the scholarly roles that he embraced and that were and are assigned to him. And third, Bersani glories in a language of renunciation for paleonymic reasons, giving old terms, terms that handily fall into the semantic field of asceticism, new significances. He invites us to treat being less than what we are otherwise than a privation, not to wipe out the "older," anorexic connotations of such desertification but to overwrite them repeatedly. Through the sheer superfluity of his language of self-abnegation, he reminds readers that the path to the desire for nonenigmatic sameness begins, and begins again, through unsettling the normative privilege that is routinely attributed to the intact identity that repudiates difference, an identity that was itself never truly intact, never not the result of what Derrida calls "incessant struggles generative of hierarchical configurations" (*Dissemination* 4).

In the spirit of Bersani's revisionary reading of psychoanalysis, devoted as it is to releasing what remains unfurled in it, let me conclude by returning to the infamous example of Freud's grandson's *fort/da* game—but as a lesson in lessness. What unactualized possibilities—let me call them "dreams"—haunt this myth-making scene? When the child, whom Freud characterizes as "not at all precocious" (14), as if already unconsciously readying himself for a certain lessness in the boy, repeatedly throws his toy away from himself, only to retrieve it, he is not seeking to shore up his psyche against an originating injury, that is, the threatening absence of the mother and the frustrating inability to discern what her desires are for him, but is, quite to the contrary, casting parts of himself into the world and taking narcissistic pleasure in finding them there. In other words, the game is not compensatory and traumatic, but exploratory and futural. As a

game, the outcome of the exercise remains uncertain because not entirely psychic, inward, but instead open to the vagaries of the wider world: it is always possible that the toy will be lost and not returned to its sender. That is the price of daring to go outside of oneself. Playing by himself and with himself, but in a larger setting that is not a static box but a span that flexes and moves as he does, the child dreams of becoming a centrifugal rather than centripetal subject; then he awakes and finds it true. In this waking dream he occupies a world that is not alien and hostile, against which his desires are pitched, but instead a changeable climate of being that inspires confidence because, to his pleasurable surprise, it welcomes his extensions of himself into it—that space that bends and folds as “I” do, in which “I” and the extensions of “I,” *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, move in partial unison, as if more undifferentiated than not. Perhaps the child becomes less by becoming-animal, like an octopus, whose brains, we are told, are dispersed along their limbs so that what they *are* is the space into which they are always in the process of stretching forth (Godfrey-Smith). Insofar as that space aligns with the aggregated sentience by which it is fluently occupied, the cephalopod–homo sapiens enjoys a condition of sameness, of commensurability with the actual, even as it-he encounters novelty. Under these more or less human conditions, the toy, in addition to the words that the boy says aloud to no one in particular, are not tools with which to control the recalcitrance of the given and to placate an insatiably hungry psyche, but the tendrils or tentacles that the child realizes he can and must cast from himself since that is the only way in which they can be discovered anew. In other words, the child demonstrates what Jean Paulhan calls *confiance au monde*, a condition that Oren Izenberg nicely describes as “a fit of person to the world, a relation to experience that is uncrossed, unchecked, undarkened by some more familiar alternative states of mind or conditions of life: skepticism, anxiety, alienation, repression, bad faith.” The toy and the syllables that Freud’s grandson utters confirm that he is also a distributable being rather than merely a worried and solitary ego, inhabiting a mode of existence that is perhaps more achievable because, as a child, he is not yet completely the product of *assujettissement*. He is more than simply the “good boy” Freud says he is (14) insofar as his actions make him less than what he is “meant to represent” (*Caravaggio’s* 43) in the story of psychoanalysis. The toy and the words are not *who* he is, but they partake of *what* he is; they are and are not him, and the ambiguity of his relationship to them and to the world into which they are projected is at once impersonal and freeing, freeing *because* impersonal. The game he plays, the aesthetic pleasures he

derives from throwing the toy and watching the arc that it carves into the space around him, and from speaking aloud and feeling the resonance of those sounds in his body, loosens the grip that his psychologization and indeed hominization has on him. They remind him that he can and should be less, beyond the theater of longing and loss, disappointment and aggression, in which he has himself been thrown. We might recall that Bersani calls for us to “collaborate” with “children who refuse to play the family game imposed on them, children who insist, in their play, on the foreignness of that game and on their determination to remain orphans” (“Father” 14). I am happy to oblige. Meeting Freud’s now no longer panoptic gaze, psychoanalysis’s foundling announces, matter-of-factly, in word and gesture, partly as a declaration of a right, partly as a challenge to his grandfather and to the reality that the good doctor is at that moment promising to the mysteries of desire, “I can dream, can’t I?”

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