

Carnal Ironies

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Intimacies, by Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips,
The University of Chicago Press.

IS THE RECTUM still a grave? To ask the question this way is of course to risk domesticating the analytic force of Leo Bersani's 1987 essay of almost that name. That force was explicitly tied to a refusal of historicizing consolations. Although the title of "Is the Rectum a Grave?" is now inescapably associated with Bersani's name, it originated in Simon Watney's *Policing Desire*, where it functioned as an indictment of received ideas about gay men and implicitly pointed toward a future in which those ideas would be revealed as factitious. When Watney wrote that "AIDS offers a new sign for the symbolic machinery of repression, making the rectum a grave," his point was that HIV had revived very old associations of homosexuality with contagion and illness. Bersani responded by insisting that we assume the linkage of gayness and death Watney had meant to protest: "If the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal (an ideal shared—differently—by men *and* women) of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death." For Watney, gay men were the victims of an epidemiological accident and a malicious ideological program. In Bersani's account our martyrdom to these forces was more ambiguous—at once a contingency it was worth being outraged about and an ethical opportunity it was our duty and almost our privilege to embrace. "Male homosexuality," Bersani famously concluded, "advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal, of *losing sight* of the self, and in so doing it proposes and dangerously represents *jouissance* as a mode of asceticism." This was a compelling call to *amor fati*: if *representing* self-dismissal sounded like a service gay men performed for the culture willy-nilly, *advertising* and *proposing* were more purposeful, even

heroic, activities. And the “danger” in that final clause seemed only contingently a matter of the risk of HIV infection: the answer to Bersani’s titular question was evidently yes, and no historical event (the abatement of the epidemic, say, or a more enlightened sex-education policy) seemed likely to change it.

Like any refusal of history, this one gained its meaning from the particular moment in which it was issued. Bersani was well aware that his insistence on linking male homosexuality and death echoed the ugliest rhetoric of the moment, and his feat in the essay was to turn this rhetorical risk into a form of intellectual integrity. For in fact AIDS had only tragically, and as it were stupidly, literalized the preoccupations with eroticism and self-loss that Bersani had long been exploring in his criticism—from his analysis, in 1965’s *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and of Art*, of “the vulnerable self and its many deaths” to his praise for “liberating self-betrayal” in *A Future for Astyanax* (1976) to *The Freudian Body*’s argument (1986) that Freud’s segregation of Eros from Thanatos was a rearguard defense against the psychoanalytic insight into the destructiveness of the erotic. One might have expected Bersani to backpedal from these positions when confronted with an epidemic that seemed so grotesquely to realize their implications. But the excitement of “Is the Rectum a Grave?” consists in seeing Bersani hold to his argument in the face of this apocalyptic historical surround. The essay’s civilized contempt for Reagan-era sex panic (“the only *necessary* response to all of this is rage”), its cut-the-crap dismissals of pieties about gay desire (“we have been telling a few lies”), perhaps most of all its insistent negativity (the essay’s most-quoted line is surely Bersani’s proclamation of the “inestimable value of sex as—at least in certain of its ineradicable aspects—anticommunal, antiegalitarian, anti-nurturing, antiloving”): if “Is the Rectum a Grave?” remains the most exhilarating rhetorical performance in a career not short on them, it is because its stylistic intensity makes AIDS itself seem merely historical—simply an occasion in the more permanent drama of Bersani’s commitment to his intellectual project. In the current critical climate, in which deference to historical context is taken as the

supreme virtue, this description may sound like the severest criticism. But it was exactly Bersani's ability to write against and through a crushing contemporaneity that made his essay—still makes it—an ethical and political inspiration.

Which is simply to say again that Bersani's negations of history are also inscriptions of it, sometimes very moving ones. I found myself thinking about the relation of Bersani's positions to their historicity in reading the central essay in *Intimacies*, the new book he has written with Adam Phillips (the book consists of three essays by Bersani, a response by Phillips, and a brief coda by Bersani). That essay, entitled "Shame on You," takes up the relations among gay sex, infection, and death in a more concentrated fashion than anything Bersani has written since "Is the Rectum a Grave?" His point of departure here is the practice of "bareback," or condomless, anal sex that, more than twenty-five years into the HIV epidemic, is enjoying a presence in pornography, on the Internet, and in the lives of many gay men. Bersani manages to insist on what is disturbing in the phenomenon while refusing the media's moralized hysteria. Beginning with an analysis of *Dans ma chambre*, a 1996 novel by Guillaume Dustan chronicling the appeal of promiscuous unsafe sex, and moving to a discussion of the films of the pornographer Paul Morris in which the exchange of bodily fluids is pursued with ritualistic devotion, Bersani describes barebacking milieus as "laboratories" for new forms of social relation. More precisely, Bersani notes that both Dustan's novel and Morris's films depict sex as an act of vertiginous depersonalization: their leading men embrace the idea (put forward with a much different emotional charge by safe-sex activists) that to have unprotected sex with one man is to have it with all of his previous partners as well. The risk involved in this impersonal form of intimacy is exactly the point: the men in what Bersani rather charmingly calls "barebacking cinema" refer to their acts of insemination as "breeding," a fact that for Bersani signals an insistence on "the sexual excitement of transmitting or conceiving death instead of life." What might seem only like reckless behavior becomes in Bersani's analysis (in addition to reckless behavior) an unflinching

acknowledgment of the deathliness of all sexuality—and an unnervingly innovative attempt to form a fantasized collectivity around that acknowledgment. Barebacking, Bersani writes, is a practice whose “distorted and regressive version of community also strikes me as a model of an ultimately unfathomable spirituality, a spirituality at once exalted and unrelievedly somber.”

Bersani’s rhetorical assurance puts over this improbable, not to say outrageous, conclusion. He demonstrates characteristic sangfroid, for example, in his description of a sex party in which a man boasting the title *The King of Loads* is fucked by fifty-six tops in a single night, or another (this one filmed by Morris) in which an apparently drug-addled young man bottoms for a handful of partners before receiving via a plastic funnel the ejaculate of several more who’ve donated semen for the occasion; Bersani moves unflappably from these heavy scenes to a consideration of their affinities with the rigors of *le pur amour*, a seventeenth-century mystical practice that figured God’s love as a force of “unknowable otherness” and the acolyte’s submission as an act of “total self-divestiture.” This linkage of the auteur responsible for *Plantin’ Seed* to the quietist theologian Francois Fénelon is clearly meant—and does not fail—to provoke the reader’s incredulity. And yet the preposterousness of the connection has the effect of defamiliarizing both these sexual practices and spirituality. After all, what—except an intolerance for the sexual as such—prevents us from seeing the single-mindedness of Morris’s libertines as a mode of modern asceticism? And what but a certain secular incuriosity about religion blinds us to the potential scandalousness of spiritual encounter? Bersani’s disregard for the contextual differences between the hermit and the barebacker restores to us a sense of the alarming originality of each of them.

A similar effect proceeds from Bersani’s lack of interest in the pharmacological context that I suspect makes Morris’s films even thinkable. Bersani acknowledges that barebacking has become widespread “in the past ten years or so,” but fails to mention that this is almost exactly when antiretroviral drug cocktails (introduced in 1996) began making HIV a manageable condition for many infected people

in this country. The cocktail's effectiveness renders technically dubious Bersani's claim that Morris is filming an "embrace of annihilation," or that barebacking videos allow us to watch a man become "a living tomb, the repository of what may kill him, of what may kill those who have penetrated him during the gang-bang, of what has already killed those who infected the men who have just infected him." The vast majority of the men featured in these films are surely infected before the cameras roll; all of them are no doubt aware of the available treatments, and the vigor with which they pursue their sexual workouts suggests that most are probably already taking them. The HIV cocktail can be onerous, expensive, and unreliable, and its availability is scandalously uneven both globally and within the developed world. But for certain people in certain places it has interrupted the straight line between unsafe gay sex and death. At first this fact seemed to me to invalidate or at least qualify Bersani's claim that (as he puts it in a moment of near self-quotation) "the barebacker's rectum is a grave." And yet, Bersani is of course right that, both for those who survived the first decades of the epidemic and for anyone who came to sexual maturity after its advent, unprotected gay sex really *is* inextricable from the idea of death, if not any longer from the fact of it. In this sense, precisely by rendering HIV something you can live with (we might say in making HIV infection a death you can live with) the cocktail has, among its more welcome effects, also made it possible to sustain communities around the fantasy and the fact of incorporating a virus whose lethal properties are both well-known and for the moment deferrable. Rather than loosen the link between morbidity and gayness, the new treatments may simply have given it a new arena in which to elaborate itself. This is not a heartening conclusion, and we can find the contextualizing evidence that will allow us to resist it. But such compensatory gestures miss the point. Bersani's ahistoricist analysis speaks through its exaggerations with strange poignancy to the emotional reality of certain forms of gay life in the age of the protease inhibitor.



It is no accident that sex is at the center of *Intimacies* and of Bersani's writing in general. Another way to describe the conflict between what I have been calling contextualizing and ahistoricist approaches is as a tension between a critical emphasis on content or on form—between the sense that phenomena are differentiated in their historically particular being and the sense that what is more notable are the patterns those phenomena trace. Perhaps no force straddles this opposition more troublingly than sex. Sex is at once crudely thematic and austere formal, the human occasion where the identity of objects is paramount (sex is the moment when every word in the sentence *I want that* seems referentially crystalline) and the occasion in which our selves and our objects can seem oddly irrelevant, merely provisional arrangements of matter that we're doing our best to unsettle (sex is the moment when every word in the sentence *I want that* feels like a question). As psychoanalysis in its tragic mode has always understood, sexuality is our mundane experience of the unthinkable. Or as Bersani put it in *The Freudian Body*, sex submits our rationality, and our sense of ourselves as bounded beings, to "a carnal irony." The irony of this irony is that carnality can no longer be understood as some kind of physical or experiential bedrock. In a sense, the psychoanalytic insight that has mattered most to Bersani is the intuition that there is something nonsexual at the heart of sexuality—something that pushes us beyond the encounter with another body, and to which that encounter may be ultimately irrelevant. The doubleness inherent in sexuality helps make sense of Bersani's interpretation of ritualized barebacking as a kind of asceticism: the men in Morris's films do indeed seem to have moved away from sex by moving through it, with what we might see as a clear-sighted awareness of the formal nature of the sexual drive.

The doubleness of sexuality also helps explain why Bersani returns to sex even in a book, like *Intimacies*, focused on the relational possibilities inherent in *de*-sexualization. The book's topics are far-flung—Henry James, French film, the *Phaedrus*, the Iraq war, and early childhood—but what unifies these essays is an ambition to envision nondestructive forms of relation. The historical originality of

psychoanalysis (as a relational practice that encourages the articulation of desire without being destroyed by it) is the starting point. Bersani's first essay in the book, "The It in the I," begins with a consideration of Patrice Leconte's 2003 film *Confidences trop intimes* (released in the United States as *Intimate Strangers*), in which a woman arriving for a first appointment with an analyst mixes up office numbers and ends up spilling her sexual secrets to an accountant. She discovers her mistake, but the pair continue to see each other through the end of the film and apparently beyond, beguiled by their accidental discovery of the rules of impersonal intimacy. Bersani follows a stray detail in the film—a conversation the two principals have about a book called *The Beast in the Jungle* (the author is never named)—to pursue an analysis of the strikingly similar relationship between John Marcher and May Bartram in James's great novella. Bersani's attentive reading turns on the "dizzying proliferation" of James's ways of using the word "it": as a pronoun with an ascertainable but often faraway referent in the text, as a way to sum up the general state of diegetic affairs, and as a means of referring to the dreaded and desired event James's characters have spent their lives awaiting. As the subject to whom this last "it" is supposed somehow to occur, Marcher is less a person than a characterological placeholder through whom the various senses of the ineffable pronoun become visible.

In Bersani's account, James's "it" thus resembles the psychoanalytic id—not, as Freud sometimes implied, the holding pen for repressed sexual energy but a kind of ineradicable principle of the pre- or suprapersonal. (As Bersani notes, Phillips's new edition of Freud reminds us that before Strachey's translation classicized it, Freud's id was just *das Es*: literally the It.) Marcher's blankness makes him, Bersani startlingly concludes, "an emblem of art." The lifelong conversation that May Bartram and John Marcher almost manage to sustain around the spectacle of this emptiness is thus an aesthetics of relation, "a mode of talk outside art that is analogous to the phenomenological blankness of art, a verbal play with the unspecifiable It of pure potentiality." Most surprising in Bersani's

reading is his claim that James flinches in the face of his own experiment when, at the end, he turns *The Beast* into a failed romance: Marcher's realization that he should have loved May Bartram is a banalization of what has been most original in their relation—its refusal to submit to the hermeneutic dictatorship of the sexual. Intriguingly, Leconte's middlebrow version of the story wins Bersani's approval as the more sustained experiment: the film's protagonists relocate to the south of France and keep talking, but we never sense that they are tempted to destroy their intimacy by mistaking it for romantic coupledness.

Nor does the film suggest that this means they can't or won't have sex. They probably shouldn't, but Bersani nicely evokes the weightlessness achieved in the closing moments of Leconte's film that, temporarily at least, renders this particular question (*the* question of human relation, according to almost anyone you ask) strangely beside the point. Leconte's well-behaved middle-class characters thus emerge in Bersani's account as the improbable counterparts of Paul Morris's self-described sex pigs, who've found their own, in some ways less imaginative, way to survive the sexual. Bersani's third essay adds to this series of relational pioneers the lovers as theorized in Plato's *Phaedrus*. What intrigues Bersani in Plato is his vision of Eros as a form of memory: the lovers of the *Phaedrus* encounter one another not as containers of unfathomable otherness but as spatially distinct versions of themselves they are in essence getting reacquainted with, and the erotic encounter becomes not a despoiling search for truth but a means to access a sense of the world as a space of adjacent sameness. Plato thus outlines the conditions for what Bersani calls an "impersonal narcissism," a way of conceptualizing existence in which "the very opposition between sameness and difference becomes irrelevant as a structuring category of being." Readers will recognize here an echo of Bersani's interest in what he and Ulysse Dutoit have termed (in *Arts of Impoverishment*) "inaccurate replication" and which he elaborated in *Homos* as a "nonthreatening supplement." Phillips's response to Bersani's essays performs its own more or less gentle form of inaccurate replication, translating

Bersani's arguments into more orthodox psychoanalytic vocabularies. "What is interesting about Bersani's description of impersonal narcissism," Phillips writes, "is how it links with a language that is at once germane though rarely explicitly alluded to in Bersani's work: the language of early development, of mothers and fathers and babies." Phillips goes on to point out the resonance between the intimacies described in Bersani's examples and the boundarylessness of the mother-infant relationship theorized by object-relations psychoanalysts (Phillips's references here include Melanie Klein and especially Christopher Bollas).

Having outlined this similarity, Phillips goes on to pose some very good questions about Bersani's examples: if impersonal narcissism so closely resembles mothering, why does everyday mothering hardly ever result in it? What, Phillips asks, would Bersani have us "take out of mothering—or parenting, in its familiar versions—that might make impersonal narcissism a viable possibility"? Phillips's answer is that parenting, however much it might resemble the Platonic—or indeed, pornographic—lovers' experience of undemanding openness, is also inescapably invested in a possessive relation to futurity. Reproductive sex indulges us in the fantasy that we are here to stay; it distracts us from the truth that "in having children we are making more deaths." In place of the comforting illusions of personal immortality, Phillips writes, Bersani's forms of intimacy ask of us "the most inconceivable thing: to believe in the future without needing to personalize it." The formulation conveys well the visionary rigor of Bersani's essays, and Phillips seems suitably reluctant to hypothesize just how we might bring this future about. He does, however, suggest that one tool for conceiving of the inconceivable might be the active pursuit of abjected emotions like shame and disgust. Because these affects so violently police the boundaries of the self, failing to avoid them might be a first step toward dismantling that self and its fantasies of aggressive expansion. "Shame is the sign of the approaching death of oneself as a recognizable person," Phillips writes. "The pursuit of shameful or shaming experiences is often the (unconscious and uncompleted) quest for ego-dissolution,

for the erasure of the person as he wants to be." The clarity of this formulation helps explain why such experiments are so rare outside the confines of certain bounded zones (works of art, analytic sessions, sexual subcultures): if an enthusiasm for the socially and psychically aversive experience of shame is a gateway to impersonal narcissism, one understands better why this form of narcissism is so rare—and why this book's prodigality of ideas is matched by a necessary paucity of real-life examples. For all its inventiveness, *Intimacies* does not leave its reader very encouraged about the viability of its proposals for reshaping relationality.



Is *Intimacies* itself an example of the type of relation it seeks to describe? Bersani opens the book with the following words: "Psychoanalysis is about what two people can say to each other if they agree not to have sex." These words, Bersani quickly makes clear, were written by Phillips in his introduction to Freud's papers on analytic technique in the new Penguin edition of Freud's work of which Phillips is the general editor. Bersani is known for his own opening lines: "No one wants to be called a homosexual" (*Homos*); "Psychoanalytically speaking, monogamy is cognitively inconceivable and morally indefensible" ("Against Monogamy"); "Let's go down, for a beginning, to the Circles of Manias, of Shit and of Blood" (*The Freudian Body*, chapter three). That he starts *Intimacies* with someone else's words is thus remarkable: we are meant to note, I think, that quotation is one way—and, of course, a nonsexual way—for an author to expose himself to intimate encounter. Ingesting the words of the other while setting them off in inverted commas, quotation plays in a literal way with the boundaries of the authorial self. It does so, moreover, in a very different sense than coauthorship. In the work on the visual arts he has written with Dutoit, Bersani has amply demonstrated how striking the act of collaboration can be. There is something peculiarly exciting about the "we" in Bersani and Dutoit's books, an excitement that stems from finding critical insights of such singularity being articulated by a compound subject. As Bersani and

Dutoit's work is devoted to what they call in *Forms of Being* the "implausibility of individuality," the air of uncanniness emanating from their collective authorship is exactly appropriate. *Intimacies*—most obviously because of the back-and-forth structure of its collaboration—is a different kind of book. In contrast to the "and" that joins Bersani's name to Dutoit's on the covers of their books, here a thin line separates the authors' names, as if to underscore that their text does not derive from and has not resulted in a merger.

This too is appropriate, since the topic of *Intimacies* is less the unlikeliness of our individuality than the sometimes violent forms taken by our persistent belief in it. Bersani quotes Phillips's appealing definition of psychoanalysis because he is interested in whether, thus defamiliarized, the analytic relation might be locatable in situations far removed from the encounter of trained therapist and paying client. But he also wants to register a dissent. "We can appreciate the epigrammatic sharpness of [Phillips's] observation," Bersani writes, "without being convinced that it entirely covers what it claims to define." For starters, Bersani takes issue with Phillips's explicit prescription of the sexual: "the deliberate and unqualified elimination of a sexual goal from human encounters seems more likely to deaden than to renew or reinvigorate the relational field." Allowing for the possibility of sex, Bersani implies, is the only way to prevent our relations from becoming fixated on the sexual as their hidden meaning. A blanket interdiction on sex, in other words, is the surest way to guarantee a (bad) sexualization—a compulsive narrowing of the attention on the exciting opacity of the other. If Bersani shares Phillips's goal of freeing relations from the ravages of desire, he amends Phillips's initial definition to suggest that the best way to do this might be to surrender to the exigencies of desire (it is this move that sets the stage for Bersani's later exploration of the bareback gangbang as a spiritual exercise in nonappropriative relationality).

Bersani's other, equally significant demurral from Phillips's definition concerns its implied reciprocity. The willingness of psychoanalytic theorists to think openly about the phenomenon of countertransference hasn't altered what Bersani calls "the essential

inequality of psychoanalytic talk," in which "one interlocutor is vastly more voluble, exposed, and uninformed (about both himself and his dialogic partner) than the other." Like the quotation that prompts them, these observations reflect on the structure and subject of *Intimacies* itself: the book is not really a balanced exchange. It is instead a forum in which one speaker gives voice to a series of loosely connected thoughts, to which his interlocutor (a "practicing analyst," Bersani reminds us) responds by sharing what he notes in what he's heard, and then, briefly—the short hour is almost up—the first speaker responds to the response. Indeed, one might push the analogy between *Intimacies* and analysis further: while Bersani spends a good portion of his second essay thinking about the radical possibilities of communal gay sex, Phillips, as we've seen, responds by reframing barebacking's impersonal intimacy in terms of its "precursor" or "precondition," the infant's relation with the mother. Acknowledging the originality of the barebacking subculture, Phillips thus also questions whether such experiments in relationality have to occur outside the family, and whether they need be homosexual in nature. In his coda, Bersani says he finds Bolla's claims about the impersonality of mothering "fascinating," but quickly returns the discussion to the homoerotic world of the *Phaedrus*. It is irresistible to see this exchange as a version of the analytic encounter in which the therapist responds to his client's claim to originality (expressed as a certain sexual scandalousness) by asking him to talk about his mother, a request to which the analysand briefly responds before changing the subject.

The tension in *Intimacies* between the gay man's interest in sexual outlawry and the analyst's return to the family romance may represent less a miscommunication than a mild comedy of differential emphasis. But the richness of *Intimacies* derives from its invitation to look for the gaps in conversation, the concerns that don't quite translate from one speaker to the other. (That Bersani's opening essay examines the misprisions inherent in what looks like therapeutic reciprocity only adds another turn of the self-reflexive screw.) Bersani and Phillips share an idiosyncratic relation to psychoanalytic truth

and a commitment to the invention of new forms of relation, but you'd never mistake the astringent style of the former for the playfulness of the latter—or confuse the writer who excoriated the culture of redemption with the one who praised D. W. Winnicott for inaugurating a “comic tradition in psychoanalysis.” And yet there is a shared project here and, improbably, a shared exploratory tone. It is a measure of the book's success at modeling new ways of being together that this conversation survives, even thrives on, the pressure of its participants' differences.



I've been tempted here, as I often am in reading Bersani's work, to understand it as a record of a specifically gay history, or as a report from a peculiarly gay sensibility. It's almost certainly unwise to succumb to this temptation. Despite the fact that the terms of approbation in Bersani's aesthetics—sameness, sterility, imperfect replication, narcissism—have always suggested homosexuality as their ultimate referent, his career can be understood as a resistance to the lure of such interpretations. No critic has been more dubious about identity categories: Bersani's insistence on the way sexuality spoils the coherence of the self makes the very notion of sexual identity seem like an oxymoron. And yet (I want to say, somehow, by the same token) there is no critic writing today whose work seems so inescapably gay. Bersani and Dutoit's remarks on an image of St. John the Baptist reproduced in *Caravaggio's Secrets* offer a kind of allegory of this interpretive impasse. The obvious sexual invitation of Caravaggio's lounging figure, they write, is also a refusal of the viewer's prurient knowingness, “the meaning of the pose having evaporated in the model's very acquiescence in it.” So with Bersani: we can put him in that pose—he'll put himself in it—but he won't let us think we've thereby come any closer to fixing the sources or final meanings of his work. Caravaggio's image thus suggests another way to state the originality of “Bersani's homosexuality”: he has compelled us to see it as a rhetorical more than a biographical fact, without of course ever having suggested that it isn't a biographical fact. If

the first of these achievements sounds like an insistence on authorial self-abstraction, the second is close to the opposite. One way to understand this tension is to say that in making its stylistic authority indistinguishable from a kind of confessional impulse, Bersani's writing testifies both to the inadequacy of historical explanation and to the inescapability of history (what I've called biography is another name for the intimate pressure of the historical).

We might then best understand homosexuality in Bersani as enabling a dizzying series of transactions among the various meanings we attribute to history. If homosexuality is the primary theme he has used to resist an anecdotal or contextualizing historicism, that resistance has itself always been legible as a response to specific features of modern gay history. But that specificity has in turn sponsored yet another abstraction from the merely contextual. The facts of contemporary gayness are sufficiently cruel to allow homosexuality to function for Bersani as a global image for the historicity of all human thought and action: even in these days of same-sex weddings and families we choose and queer adoption, homosexuality remains an embarrassing and embarrassed identity—which is to say an emphatically historical identity. The negativity that thus unavoidably colors modern gay experience allows it to work for Bersani as a way of insisting much more generally on the historical as the damaged ground of any theorization; his attraction as a critic to the more abjected forms homosexuality has taken—fucked, ashamed, infected—is less a penchant for the lurid per se than a strategy for making visible the inevitability of everyone's submission to that damage. This fact makes it all the more remarkable that homosexuality has also, finally, served Bersani as a recurrent image of what it would mean, if not to escape our historicity, then at least to take an aesthetic distance from it. In his recent work, "at-homeness," "ripeness," "connection," and "beneficence" have all figured as key ideas, and all have been linked to gay topics or images or artists—a fact that could lead us to see homosexuality as a transcendent (even, it must be said, redemptive) phenomenon in his work. The contradictions densely coiled around the image of homosexuality here may not be susceptible to any final

clarification. But this very undecidability explains why homosexuality feels so inextricably bound to the defining tension in Bersani's writing between the tragic and the utopian. A condensation of what is most exempted from circumstance and what is most subject to it, homosexuality, finally, also serves as an emblem for the paradox of Bersani's own writing, which for nearly fifty years has combined an extreme self-sufficiency with an equally extreme openness to the world's objects.

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