

Homoverse

The justification of close, contextual reading [...] is that the artist's [writer's] range of inventiveness, like our range of freedom in life, can perhaps best be measured by the number of ways in which, at any moment, he can be different from himself.

—Balzac to Beckett 20

*I*f you are reading this special issue on the writings of Leo Bersani, chances are you're homo.

By this, we glibly extend the biting neologism coined by Bersani in his 1995 book of (nearly) the same name, where he gestured to a kind of relational subjectivity that had no definable or stable contours (*a homosexual, a queer, a homo*, for example), but nevertheless evoked a novel existential status *in potentia*. Homo-ness is sameness for Bersani, a term that he used to oppose the logic of difference or self versus other that he detected in most queer theoretical interventions of the 1980s and 1990s, a war-embrace that he struggled to undo in favor of imagining ethical freedom as a virtual oneness with the world. Homo-ness swims *with* the “homo” in homosexuality, but it doesn't partake of identity politics; one doesn't aspire to it, or differentiate oneself from others through it. There is no “it” to begin with. If homo-ness terminologically insists on anything, it *structurally* registers the various ethical, social, and aesthetic forms, relations, and movements through which we are challenged to think in difference from ourselves, but different insofar as our being-in-the-world acknowledges the similitudes

we bear with and to one another *as* formalized and deformed beings: “Difference not as a trauma to be overcome,” Bersani writes, “but rather as a nonthreatening supplement to sameness” (*Homos* 7). In addition, sameness for Bersani necessarily maps virtual exchanges with things that lie outside the prestige of the human: literature, film, painting. In the epigraph we take from his early book, *Balzac to Beckett*, close reading suggestively becomes a practice of homo-ness: it intimates a form of critical engagement that makes available not simply different readings of a passage but also differences within each of us *in sameness with each other*. Insofar as we are reading the same passage, for example, we are reading with and alongside it and others; the passage becomes “the same” in this recursion and resonance, and we become part of the writing and a bit “*less than what we really are*” (“Sociability” 47). In this sense, reading and writing strike out virtual paths of homo-ness, innovating a “range of freedom in life” that the aesthetic allows for because it opens and develops modes of being that emphasize points of similitude; we are not at all defined by the qualities of what we think we are or by our recognizable differences from others, but rather by something else entirely, a nullity or collapse of those things—a nullity the aesthetic imagines to the side of the social that is not captured by it but is nonetheless profound in its dematerialization. Less than being, it might have been “*missed* in the urgent and exclusionary soliciting of our attention” (Bersani and Dutoit, *Caravaggio’s* 64).

It is this kind of homo-collocation that our special issue modestly envisions: an assembly of critical thinkers, strangers and friends, thinking, reading, and writing alongside and athwart Bersani’s writings but never quite paying tribute or genuflecting to *him*. Indeed, our charge to our writers was brief but specific:

The idea is that each contributor will pick a sentence or two, or a very brief paragraph from Bersani’s writings, and use it as a textual object to perform an engaged closed reading. We envisage each contribution to run at most 3000 words, a brevity that will honor Bersani’s own famously rigorous attention to the disarming counterintuition of the “opening line,” or the stylistic value of the sentence’s involute syntax as a conceptual force, while also profoundly conveying what is most theoretically vital for you in Bersani’s writings. We are interested to hear what has been generative about his distinct formulations—however counterintuitive or apposite—for your own work, and why.

We have striven to create a collection of essays that spans the entirety of Bersani's oeuvre, and we were especially interested in each contribution keeping in sight the aesthetic argument that underpinned and motivated his work. In close cooperation with the contributors, we have tried to avoid redundancies of topic or sentence and to seek out authors working in a variety of fields reflective of Bersani's remarkably diverse range across nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, poetry, film, art, theater, and performance; Assyrian sculpture; gay male culture; Caravaggio; psychoanalysis; and early modern and contemporary continental philosophy. This catalog, representing the oneness of his oeuvre, itself reflects a *homoverse*. Perhaps the only field not represented in this special issue is the one that Bersani became interested in toward the end of his career: astrophysics.

If you engage with Bersani's work to understand his project and his way of thinking, you can dive in pretty much anywhere. This is not to say that his vast corpus remained unchanged over the more than sixty years of its writing. Nor is it to imply that any two texts, chronologically separated from each other in the works cited, do not to a greater or lesser extent differ from each other in notable and important ways. Indeed, as with the work of most any great thinker and writer, Bersani's work could be sorted into a number of stages or phases (if not to say "periods"): the early literary criticism of the 1960s and 1970s; post-"Rectum" and queer theory of the late 1980s through to the first years of the current century; the time in the late 1990s when he turned from the notion of self-shattering to that of inaccurate replication; and what might be described as the cosmological turn, evident in his last two books, *Thoughts and Things* and *Receptive Bodies*. But we have something else in mind, hence the arrangement and order of this collection according to single terms, concepts, or what Bersani would likely have referred to as "categories."

Indeed, one of the things that is perspicuously represented in this array of essays and accompanying key terms is that the differences in Bersani's thinking occurred (to use his phrase) "within a fundamental sameness," a conceptual sphere that bears his indelible signature. This points to a peculiar and exhilarating sense of the temporality of the act of thinking, which Bersani characterized as "the anticipatory re-categorizing of an idea" ("Re-perusal" 274-75), meaning "already reformulating an argument that [he] would make many years later." Bersani is talking about neither the development in the present of a past formulation, nor a reformulation in the future of a former argument. Instead, he is telling us that the act of thinking, its "present," is not only the creation of a new and different idea, but that

thinking's formulations are, themselves, the registration of recategorizations that will be made in the future. Bersani writes that this experience "is further evidence of a more general argument about thinking," namely "that in positing the future of our past thinking breaks down the temporality we usually assign to mental life and points to the oneness, the persisting presentness, of all thought."

This nonlinear, achronological temporality is the distinction of Bersani's thinking and writing, which might be taken to characterize the time and tempo of our reading of his work. Indeed, it resonates with the work of our contributors: neither simply paying tribute to the queer scholar nor rehearsing the task of mere explication but rather thinking with and against ideas whose "presentness" commits us all, as critics, to the unforeseen possibilities of recategorization.

More of a rhythm than an image of his writing, this registration of recurrences allows us to realize that when Bersani was theorizing about correspondences, resemblances, sameness, stillness, and the oneness of being, he was also speaking (never self-allegorically!) about his own thinking and writing, including in relation to others. It thus makes sense, given his perception of the persisting presentness of thought, that Bersani came to open his last two books with forewarnings against prefaces and that he advocated for a kind of nonredeeming freedom that comes from not keeping one's original promises, as well as in the failure to conclude.

While interested in those moments when language proved itself to be curiously inadequate, and even more so, at times, beside the point, there are few contemporary theorists who can match him when it comes to the art of the sentence, through an inimitable style and syntax that articulated a depersonalized aesthetics and ethics, all the while being uniquely "Bersani." He was also deeply fascinated by endeavors—whether critical or clinical—that he regarded as worthy of being pursued precisely because they are epistemologically slight or useless. Bersani's thinking about our lessness, "being less than what we really are," also corresponds to his reflections on the ontology of thought itself, staying attuned to the lessness of nondeclarative insights or ideas that are less than what we think they really are *as* thoughts. Subtracted of familiar qualities, arguments, and structures, Bersani approached thought in the same way that he imagined, for example, the paintings of Rothko: compositionally moving within the range of "the uncreated, to a space beyond or before all movement and desire" (Bersani and Dutoit, *Arts* 176). Uncreated thought is the other side of premeditated design; it thwarts appropriation and certainty. For Bersani, thinking transpires

most powerfully—and impossibly—at unforeseen thresholds that finely mark the working through of notions skirting revelation, summoning up just as soon as they might vanish. These unexpected alignments pulse, erotically, as speculative, unbound, and conceptually irreducible to set criteria. It is to this “persisting presentness” that our special issue commits itself, turning multiply to Bersani at the same time that we also elegiacally resolve ourselves now to leaving him.

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