

(RE)TREATING MASTER-BATION: LEO BERSANI, *THOUGHTS AND THINGS* (UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 2105)

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Philosophy and the study of the actual world have the same relation to one another as onanism and sexual love.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (1847)¹

The fantasy of language separating us from authentic being exemplifies philosophical onanism. Leo Bersani, *Thoughts and Things* (2015)²

“Onanism,” in the epigraphs above, is bad—a kind of slur. And yet, ironically, what Bersani calls “philosophical onanism” (which, of course, would be a mere tautology for Marx and Engels, for whom “philosophy” is “onanism”) is precisely what Marx and Engels appear to be guilty of when they argue, immediately prior to the lines quoted above, that one must simply “leave philosophy”: “leap out of it and devote oneself like an ordinary man to the study of actuality.”³ After all, wouldn’t such a retreat from “philosophical phraseology”⁴ assume as its very condition of possibility “the fantasy of language separating us from authentic being,” i.e., precisely that which exemplifies “philosophical onanism”?

In this way, perhaps we must add Marx and Engels to a hypothetical list of other “philosophical onanists” already treated in the Bersanian corpus, which, when read retrospectively (from behind, ass first), would have to begin with (the letter A), “Artaud, Birth, and Defecation,” Bersani’s 1976 essay for *Partisan Review*.⁵ Here, “Artaud’s mistrust of verbal language” (A 446) and, specifically, his desire to abolish the dispossessing, disseminating “tyranny of the text” (A 439) in order to devote himself to “the physical immediacy of the theater” (A 439) is symptomatic, for Bersani, of a consciousness retreating to “the brutal if illusory omnipotence of masturbatory fantasies” (A 450). Or as Bersani puts it:

Artaud’s most urgent need is to abolish the space between the self and the world . . . to save itself from any extensions or, to use a Derridean term, any dissemination which would scatter and destroy

presence. (A 446)

[Thus:]

The brutality of desire has to do with its solipsistic nature: the world it conjures up is responsible only to a personal formula for satisfaction. In a sense, the ideal context for triumphant desire is masturbation. (A 451)

So, already in 1976, “masturbation,” for Bersani, is master-bation, a form of “brutal if illusory” mastery. And in seeking to abolish the space—or what we might call the *spacing of writing*—between “the self and the world” in order “to save itself from any extensions,” Artaud exemplifies the “paranoid relationality” (TT 3)—the hatred of the world promoted by ideologies of self-preservation (and self-love)—that will become a dominant motif in *Thoughts and Things*, particularly in chapter 3, “‘Ardent Masturbation’ (Descartes. Freud, Proust, et al.)” which attempts to trace this “paranoid relationality” to a powerful Cartesian assumption in Western thought, namely, “the ontological gap separating *res cogitans* from *res extensa*” (the disjunction between the self and the world), which has, according to Bersani, “accustomed us to thinking our connection to otherness in terms of epistemological appropriation and possession” (TT ix). In a word: master(y)-bation.

Thoughts and Things, however, is more than Bersani’s attempt to re-treat masturbation. Rather, in this latest collection of essays, Bersani asks an even more diabolical question: What would it mean to retreat from the “masturbatory retreat” (Bersani TT 34)? Or as he wonders in chapter 3:

Is there a nonmasturbatory mode of thinking, and of writing? In asking this last question, I don’t mean, absurdly, to reduce thinking and writing to masturbation. (Bersani TT 54)

And yet, when Bersani advises his readers at the start of *Thoughts and Things* to skip ahead and begin their reading with chapter 3, “‘Ardent Masturbation’ (Descartes, Freud, Proust, et al.),” the implication is clear: before speculating about any “nonmasturbatory mode of thinking,” we must first come to grips with that “brutal if illusory” will to knowledge and mastery embodied by a “masturbatory mode of thought” (Bersani TT 63), beginning, above all, with the solitary retreat of Descartes’ *Meditations* (1641).

Although just one of many retreats treated in *Thoughts and Things*—from the masturbatory fantasies of Genet’s prison cell (*Our Lady of the Flowers*) and Proust’s cork-lined room (*Remembrance of Things Past*), to the story of an orphan who retreats into the woods to merge with a tree in Pierre Bergounioux’s *La Casse* (1994)—Descartes’ *Meditations* nevertheless remains the model, if not the inaugurator, of a modern “pattern of autonomous self-reflection” (TT 42) which, as Bersani says, “links Descartes to otherwise very distinct thinkers who follow him” (TT 42) in the “arduous”—if not “ardent”—discipline of “approaching, encircling, and finally mastering the inner grounds of thought’s certainty” (TT 42). And indeed, it is the discipline of this step-by-step procedure of (mental) mastery, so meticulously inventoried in the *Meditations*, which interests Bersani. He quotes Descartes: “I will now shut my eyes, stop my ears, and withdraw my senses”; “I will converse with myself and scrutinize myself more deeply” (TT 40). This movement of *withdrawal*—of solitary *retreat*—not only exemplifies the “paranoid relationality” of Cartesian introspection. As a prelude to a form of epistemological master(y)-bation, Bersani suggests, its hard-won discoveries are like so many “sublimated climaxes” (TT 54):

These discoveries curiously resemble preludes to an activity of considerably less historical significance [namely, masturbation] . . . In fantasy, as in Cartesian introspection, the world is set aside in order that the elements of its presence within the subject may be reassembled in view of a mastering of the world—in masturbatory fantasy, [it is] a mastery *coterminous* with the rearrangement itself, [while] in Descartes [it is] a mastering *subsequent* to the solitary introspective reassemblage of the instruments of conquest. (Bersani TT 54; emphasis added)

Either way, this “apparently trivializing analogy” (TT 54) sets the stage for what Bersani, at the end of chapter 3, will invoke as the possibility of a “nonmasturbatory, world-immersed mode of thinking and writing” (TT 56).⁶

Although there are several hints as to what this might look like—for instance, Bersani considers the “oneness of cosmic being” (TT xii) in chapter 5, “Far Out,” and affirms the “anti-Cartesian assumption of a commonality of being among the human subject and both the human and nonhuman world” (TT 62) in chapter 4, “I Can Dream, Can’t I”—the two main examples of this “world-immersed” mode in *Thoughts and Things* involve what we might call filmic retreats, namely, the (utopic) figure of the Foreign Legion in Claire Denis’s film *Beau travail* (1999), and the (dystopic) figure of Wrenwood in Todd Haynes’s film *Safe* (1995).

Before considering these two retreats, however, we should note that for Bersani the retreat of masturbation is always profoundly bound-up with the familial (or Oedipal) retreat, so that the figure of “the orphan” running throughout *Thoughts and Things*, by its very absence of parents (or family relations), would seem to promise new modes of relationality—unfamiliar modes of connectedness and sociality—beyond “the relational identities imposed on the subject” (TT xi) by the insular violence of the “family retreat” (TT 114) and its imperatives of self-preservation (and self-love). It’s no accident then that Bersani describes the (utopic) figure of the Legionnaires in *Beau travail* as “an international collection of ethnically orphaned men, many of them displaced foreign nationals with a past from which the Legion allows them to escape” (TT 6). For these “nation-orphans” (TT 100), as Bersani calls them, the Legion—not France—is homeland. Having no “fatherland,” the Legionnaires in *Beau travail* represent not only a retreat from the “family [nation] retreat,” but, in the many scenes of them arduously training together on “an arid plateau overlooking the sea and facing three volcanic formations rising from the water” (TT 11), as Bersani notes, the Legionnaires embody an expansive, “world-immersed” mode of depsychologized connectedness.

By *removing* (or *withdrawing*) these training scenes from any militaristic base, Denis treats the Legionnaires less as a subject-to-know than as a “filmic experiment in bodily relatedness” (TT 11). As Bersani puts it:

The exercises we now see have no clearly discernible combat function; they prepare the Legionnaires for nothing except the sociality being improvised by their bodies in their choreographed movements. The choreography demilitarizes them. [. . .] Intimacy is exhausted by the exhausting repetition of a strenuous and fundamentally indifferent coming together. An energetic choreography stifles the movements of desire before they can become psychic designs. Sensuality, depsychologized, is prevented from mutating into the sexual. The pleasures into which the Legionnaires exercise themselves are nonpurposive pleasures of touch. (TT 11-12)

If this (utopic) “nonsadistic movement” (TT 12) embodied by Denis’s Legionnaires is as close as we get to a “nonmasturbatory, world-immersed mode of thinking and writing” in *Thoughts and Things*, then the (dystopic) retreat of Wrenwood would seem to be its sinister twin.

Sinister because, like the Legionnaires, Carol White in *Safe* could also be read as a figure of retreat from the “family retreat,” leaving her family behind to join the Wrenwood commune after being made aware of her “world-immersed” *connectedness to* and *oneness with* the environment (albeit in the negative form of allergy and disease). And yet, while the removal (or withdrawal) of the Legionnaires moves towards an expansive, depsychologized sociality, for Bersani, Carol’s retreat seems to move in the opposite direction: towards a psychologized solitude of self-preservation (and self-love). It’s no surprise, then, that Bersani describes Carol’s supposedly toxin-free quarters at Wrenwood in terms that recall the (masturbatory) retreat of Cartesian introspection and its “paranoid relationality”:

[Carol] has to leave her cabin, still too exposed to poisons from the outside, and take what may be permanent refuge in a small, white, windowless, porcelain-lined, almost furniture-free, igloo-like

structure that leaves her sequestered even from the sequestered Wrenwood community, alone with the self that is, she has been taught to believe, both the source of her illness and a possible cure (TT 28).

The fact that Carol has been *taught* these things—this “gospel of self-love” (TT 32), as Bersani calls it—by Peter Dunning, the pastoral father-figure of Wrenwood, only further proves that Carol, unlike the “orphaned” Legionnaires, never truly retreats from the “family retreat,” or, more sinisterly, has simply replaced one (family/masturbatory) retreat for another.⁷ Indeed, the insidious message of father Peter to his Wrenwood flock—i.e., that environmental/immune diseases can be treated by self-love—is one Bersani believes he has heard all-too-well before “during the early years of AIDS”:

Especially during the early years of AIDS, we were repeatedly told that the best and safest protection against dangerous relations with others is to renounce intimate relations with them and to practice abstinence. And if abstinence must allow for some sexual practice, that practice will of course be *masturbation*—that is, *sexual self-love*. Thus gays were once again marginalized, this time with apparent scientific authorization, in order to both save us from a world that had become too dangerous for us, and to save the world from the danger we embodied. (TT 33; emphasis added)

Bersani, here, changes his tack. Instead of masturbation being a form of “brutal if illusory” mastery and (self-) possession, it’s now as if the (gay) masturbators *themselves* are mastered, duped by well-meaning gurus like Peter, and put in their (safe) place. Thus, “Wrenwood is the perfect servant of a political strategy designed by networks of power to isolate individuals from political life” (Bersani TT 33). This “Foucauldian” (TT 33) tack is then developed by Bersani below in what can only be called an unbelievable passage:

Safe is indeed “about” AIDS in the sense that it enacts, as a voluntary retreat from society, the banishment from the relational field of intimacy that a homophobic culture was able to present as a hygienic imperative, and that poor, mystified Peter sees as an opportunity for self-knowledge and self-love. Peter has learned how to love Peter, which also means that Peter has learned to make of his own peter the principal object of his desire. His cure for dangerous relations—a cure for himself and for others—is the oxymoron of a masturbatory relationality At the same time, in obeying the now medically authorized homophobic goal of removing [gays] from sexuality (and especially nonmonogamous sexuality), the social order granted us a new kind of legitimacy: one earned by our acceptance of a masturbatory retreat, our acceptance of “Wrenwood” as providing the boundaries of our identity. (TT 34)

This passage is unbelievable for several reasons.

First, it should be noted that Foucault initially planned to include a separate volume on masturbation (*La Croisade des enfants*) in his *History of Sexuality* series, which he later abandoned. But judging from his lectures at the Collège de France on the *Abnormal* (1974-1975), we can assume that, as Foucault sees it, the invention of “the children’s crusade”—and its ardent quest to eradicate masturbation by violently *pathologizing* and *responsibilizing* its relations—was carried out, precisely, in the name of what Bersani above calls a “hygienic imperative.”⁸ The fact that Bersani himself attempts to turn masturbation *into* a “hygienic imperative” in the passage above—repeating this pathologizing/responsibilizing violence—is not only a massive irony at the heart of *Thoughts and Things*. It is, frankly, hard to believe that Bersani could be so oblivious to such a key part of Foucault’s corpus.

Second, the notion that masturbation “removes” gays from sexuality, as Bersani claims above, is unbelievable in its assumption that masturbation is not itself a form of “sexuality,” as if “sexuality” only occurs between *two* (or *more*) *human beings*, or as if one is ever truly “one,” ever truly “alone.” Indeed, one wonders how Bersani would respond to the implication of Lacan’s aphoristic claim that “there is no sexual relationship,” namely, that

all “sex” (even what Marx and Engels, in our epigraph, call actual “sexual love”) is *masturbation with a partner* (whether two or more humans are involved or not)?⁹

Third, the idea that masturbation (or the “masturbatory retreat”) could ever provide “the boundaries of our identity,” as Bersani claims above, is unbelievable since, unlike the inventions of “the heterosexual” and “the homosexual,” the invention of “masturbation” in the eighteenth century never solidified into a “sexual identity.” Indeed, “the great interest of autoeroticism,” as Eve Sedgwick has pointed out, is precisely as a “form of sexuality . . . that today completely *fails* to constitute anything remotely like a minority identity.”¹⁰ Of course, for Bersani to admit this “complex history” (Sedgwick 135) would also mean admitting that the term most associated with masturbation since the eighteenth century is not “self-love,” as he repeatedly insists, but “self-abuse”—a kind of “battering or mutilation of oneself” (Sedgwick 145). So why this erasure?

If the term “self-abuse” never occurs in *Thoughts and Things*, it is because, I believe, it *cannot* occur there without radically undermining Bersani’s claims about the “masturbatory retreat” and its supposedly “paranoid relationality” of self-protection and self-preservation. This erasure, in other words, is itself an act of self-protective, self-preserving “self-love.”

Perhaps the most blatant of these (self-protective, self-preserving) erasures of *Thoughts and Things* occurs in chapter 3, “‘Ardent Masturbation’ (Descartes, Freud, Proust, et al.).” As Bersani notes, the title “ardent masturbation” is taken from a non-standard translation of Freud’s German phrase: “*die eifrig geübte Onanie*” (TT 53). With its connotations of burning mastery, we can understand why Bersani would “prefer” Joan Riviere’s non-standard translation (“ardent masturbation”) to a more literal translation, such as “diligently practiced onanism,” or even “eagerly skilled onanism.” However, we must ask: what has been lost in this “preference”? Is “onanism” the same as “masturbation”?

Although such a question is never asked by Bersani, his allusion to Derrida’s *Dissemination* (1972) in his early Artaud essay (if not in *Thoughts and Things*) begs it.¹¹ *Dissemination*, after all, is a text littered with references to an (undecidably) in/voluntary spilling and scattering of “seeds (*spermata*)” (351) which, as Derrida says, is “always carried out at a loss and unto death” (351). *Dissemination*, we might say, is sown in the sticky refuse of Onan, the man put to death in the Old Testament book of Genesis after having “spilt his seed on the ground,” but whose name, ironically, gives birth to “onanism,” that eighteenth-century invention disseminated throughout Europe in various medical manuals and sensational handbooks. As Stengers and Van Neck recount this “crime of Onan” (Gen. 38: 6-10):

Judah, the Bible says, had three sons, the eldest of whom where Er and Onan. Er married Tamar, but he “offended Yahweh greatly, so Yahweh brought about his death. Then Judah said to Onan, *take your brother’s wife, and do your duty as her brother-in-law, to produce a child for your brother*. But Onan, knowing the child would not be his, spilt his seed on the ground every time he slept with his brother’s wife, to avoid providing a child for his brother. What he did was offensive to Yahweh, so he brought about his death.”¹²

Onan, we might say, *refuses* to play the “family game” (Bersani TT 14)—the generation(al) game—through a kind of technique of the spilt seed “carried out at a loss and unto death.”

In fact, it is this retreat from the “family retreat”—this onanistic refusal of reproductive futurity—that ultimately provokes death. It’s no accident that Tissot, in his infamous anti-masturbation treatise, *L’Onanisme, ou Dissertation physique sur les maladies produites par la masturbation* (1760), compares onanism to “an act of suicide.”¹³ Indeed, Bersani himself seems to sense something of this “self-negativizing” (TT 35), as he calls it, in the (masturbatory) retreat of Carol in *Safe*. But if “the negativity of Carol’s withdrawal from the world” (TT 93) remains a mysterious black hole in *Thoughts and Things*—“it is up to us to decide,” as Bersani says, “if that body harbors some as yet unnamed passion” (TT 36)—this mysterious remainder nevertheless attests in

its very “negativity” to an erasure of onanistic “self-abuse” at the heart of *Thoughts and Things* (as if ardently *rubbed-out*), a “self-abuse” whose dissemination is beyond willful mastery and indifferent to self-preservation, or as Derrida says, “spills it in advance” (268).

In a similar way, Genet—the onanistic orphan—remains a foreclosed figure of “negativity” at the heart of Bersani’s reading of *Our Lady of the Flowers*. It’s ironic because, as we’ve seen, the figure of “the orphan” usually appears in *Thoughts and Things* as a promise of (utopic) retreat from the insular violence of the familial (or Oedipal) retreat. Indeed, Bersani ends chapter 1, “Father Knows Best,” in exalted praise for “orphans”:

I would like my own exercise in witnessing [in *Thoughts and Things*] to be taken as an admittedly exalted collaboration with the children who refuse 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. (TT 14)

But if Bersani never mentions Genet’s orphanhood—in stark contrast to his exalted Legionnaires—perhaps it’s because Genet remains too much a prisoner of what Bersani calls “his exalted masturbatory fantasies” (TT 16). And yet, how else would “the children,” as Bersani says, “refuse the family game imposed on them,” if not by refusing the Oedipal game and its suppression of masturbation, imposed, as Freud says (in the case of a boy), by parents “forbidding him to manipulate his genitals”?¹⁴ After all, Freud is clear: “Every new arrival on this planet is faced by the task of mastering the Oedipus complex.”¹⁵ And the epitome of this mastery is precisely the renunciation, as Freud says (this time speaking of a girl), of “the manual stimulation of her genitals.” In fact, so crucial is this renunciation that Freud himself wonders in his last book, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1940), whether the Oedipus complex would even exist without this suppression of masturbation, stating: “no investigation has yet been made of the form taken by [the Oedipus complex] among races and in civilizations which do not suppress masturbation among children” (O 93).

Admittedly, Bersani’s reconsideration of the mother-child dyad—as a way of questioning “the necessity of the father as the vehicle of entry into the social” (TT 110)—seems to offer an alternative: “There is a warmth of fusion prior to the relational itself” (Bersani TT 113). And indeed, it is precisely the figure of “the orphan” in Bergounioux’s *La Casse* that invites us, as Bersani says, to consider “maternal warmth not as fortifying a world-denying intimacy, but as spreading beyond the child and suffusing otherness not with echoes of familial violence but rather with a nonfamilial familiarity” (TT 114). Here, finally, we might say, is a “nonmasturbatory, world-immersed mode of thinking and writing.” And yet, what else is this “maternal warmth” but “the warm flow of milk” (T 47), as Freud says, stimulating the child’s lips as it ardently sucks at the mother’s breast? As Freud notes, “To start with, the child certainly makes no distinction between the breast and its own body” (O 89); “it has no sexual object, and is thus auto-erotic” (T 48). But isn’t this auto-eroticism precisely what Bersani wants to call a “warmth prior to the relational itself”? Ironically, if “maternal warmth” (or “cosmic oneness”) turns out to be just another name for “auto-eroticsim,” then Bersani ends up sounding a lot like “poor, mystified Peter.”

If not, in his ardent desire to retreat from the “masturbatory retreat,” Bersani has simply proven himself a true disciple of the “philosophical onanism” of Artaud, who once wrote:

I have only a face of wax and I am an orphan
And yet wherever I go Angels come
To show me the path of that strange Father
Whose heart is softer than a human father’s heart

Seek me out, I come from the kingdom of peace,
That peace that penetrates the very stones,
And I have pity on this incessant dust

Of human bones returning to the burned ground.

I am he who can dissolve the terror
Of being a man¹⁶

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NOTES

1. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* [1847]. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1998, 253-254.
2. Leo Bersani, *Thoughts and Things*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015, 56. Hereafter cited in the text as TT.
3. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, 253.
4. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, 253.
5. Leo Bersani, "Artaud, Birth, and Defecation." *Partisan Review* 43 (Summer 1976): 439-452. Hereafter cited in the text as A.
6. It should be noted that, along with Spinoza and Merleau-Ponty, Bersani attributes this "nonmasturbatory, world-immersed mode of thinking and writing" to Descartes, of all people, who, "in spite of himself" (56), as Bersani says, "initiates and sustains a kind of intellectual sociality that could be thought of as superseding the solitary concentration of his certainties" (56). Descartes, in other words, wasn't a total jerk(-off); the mere fact that he made his procedures explicit—i.e., that he wrote them down for others to read—is enough to somewhat redeem him in Bersani's eyes. Although, clearly, the damage has been done.
7. Unlike Carol's relation to Peter, as Bersani states, "the Legion constitutes its own paternity" (6).
8. Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975*. Trans. Graham Burchell. New York: Picador, 2003, 231-329.
9. Slavoj Žižek is, perhaps, the main advocate of this interpretation. See, for example, Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*. New York: Norton, 2006, 48-51.
10. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Jane Austen and Masturbating Girl." In: *Solitary Pleasures: The Historical, Literary, and Artistic Discourses of Autoeroticism*. Eds. Paula Bennett and Vernon A. Rosario. New York: Routledge, 1995, 136. Hereafter cited in the text.
11. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* [1972]. Trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981. Hereafter cited in the text. Derrida, of course, had already broached the subject of "masturbation" ("that dangerous supplement") in an earlier reading of Rousseau. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* [1967]. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, 141-164.
12. Jean Stengers and Anne Van Neck, *Masturbation: The History of a Great Terror* [1998]. Trans. Kathryn Hoffmann. New York: Palgrave, 2001, 21.
13. Tissot, quoted in Stengers and Van Neck, 67.
14. Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* [1940]. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1949, 90-92. Hereafter cited in the text as O.
15. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* [1905]. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Basic Books, 1975, 92. Hereafter cited in the text as T.
16. Antonin Artaud, "The Poem of St. Francis of Assisi" [1922]. Trans. Helen Weaver. In: *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*. Ed. Susan Sontag. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, 4-5.