

Introduction

This study makes two related claims about Leo Bersani's work: it is *essentialist*; and it is *speculative*. These may, we recognize, read like indictments. In contemporary theory, "essentialism" and "speculativeness" have come to indicate ancient errors of thought that we are supposed to have overcome. For us, "essence" most often names a prosthetic fantasy with which philosophers used to prop up their rickety ontologies, cover over their systems' constitutive incompleteness and instability; contemporary theory has taken as its task the exposure of such sleights-of-hand, the undoing of their treacherous glamor. There are ways to flirt with essentialism: the sin is redeemed, for example, when one's confession is accompanied by an appeal to "strategy." When we declare ourselves "strategic essentialists," we acknowledge the necessary performativity of our onto-political actions, recognize the ethical impurity of our worldly being. Otherwise, we are supposed to have learned from the Continental thinkers of the twentieth century—most important of whom for our context is Jacques Derrida—that claims to essences merely reveal an imperious wish to universalize our inescapably partial perspectives, to evade the ethical implications of our radical immanence.

"Essence" is a familiar ruse particularly in "speculative" thought. If twentieth-century philosophy has done much to delegitimize once-routine claims to essences, the error of "speculation" was pointed out by even earlier commentators. It is particularly in Immanuel Kant's critique of metaphysics and Karl Marx's de-idealization of Hegelian thought that the long hegemony of speculative philosophy came to an end. The critical turn of Kant's philosophy consisted of his outlawing all synthetic *a priori* propositions in metaphysics. Such propositions, according to Kantian epistemology, aim at a realm beyond human experience; they remain, hence, merely speculative. As Kant writes in the 1787 preface to the *Critique of*

Pure Reason, critical philosophy should “deprive speculative reason of its pretension to extravagant insight [*der spekulativen Vernunft zugleich ihre Anmaßung überschwenglicher Einsichten beheme*].” Without this dispossession, the raptures of the speculative mind are wont to turn into the unbridled fanaticism of *Schwärmerei*.¹ Marx deploys the same term, *überschwänglich* (effusive, rapturous, exuberant), to abjure German idealism: according to him, Hegel’s political philosophy has managed to supply nothing but “abstract extravagant thinking on the modern state [*abstrakte überschwängliche Denken des modernen Staats*].”² If Hegel wanted to render mappable the realm that Kant deemed out of bounds, Marx implies that his philosophy has done nothing but produce political theories of oneiric unrealness, the kinds of idiosyncratic fantasies that Kant warned await for us once we engage in speculations. Marx saw in Hegel a return to the idealist excesses of seventeenth-century metaphysics, the kind of “*wild speculation* [*trunkenen Spekulation*]” that he and Friedrich Engels identified in the likes of Descartes, Malebranche, Spinoza, and Leibniz.³ Many Marxist philosophers have since then continued to call out the drunken antics of their speculative predecessors.

We begin to observe Bersani’s frequent indifference to such commonplaces of contemporary thought by following the unfolding, ongoing now for half a century, of his oeuvre. We can commence this effort by turning to a recent, brief text. In the preface to the second edition of his first book, *Marcel Proust: Fictions of Life and of Art* (1965; second ed. 2013), Bersani observes that the early study contains, in an unelaborated, virtual form, much of what is to develop, or perhaps to actualize, in his writing about Proust over the course of the next fifty years: “all the later work,” he writes, “is, in some way, already included in the first study.”⁴ This observation, we propose, should be situated in three intellectual-artistic contexts, read alongside three thinkers whose work has been crucial in informing Bersani’s thought. It is here that a Bersanian essentialism begins to emerge.

Bersani obligingly draws our attention to the first, and most obvious, of these experimenters. If his work begins with Proust, it not only never leaves the Proustian sphere but also cannot but replicate the peculiar structure of the Proustian novel. Like Proust’s, his work, in proceeding from its initial articulation, modifies its earlier stages in a movement of what Bersani is to call “circular mobility” (DSM ix) or “circular hermeneutics” (CR 15). He evokes Germaine Brée’s argument, in *The World of Marcel Proust* (1966), that the “Combray” section—the first couple of hundred

pages of *À la recherche du temps perdu*—contains in an embryonic form everything that is to follow in Proust's novel. Each subsequent section constitutes a deepening of the initial figuration. Already in *Marcel Proust*, he calls this “a process of invention and enrichment” (*MP* 6) characteristic of Proust; *À la recherche*'s “idea of growth” consists not of “an accumulation of new experiences, but [of] a re-creation and an *approfondissement* of past experience” (*MP* 83). As he writes later, in this mode the text unfolds in “concentric circles . . . in which each section is a mistaken yet illuminating replication and *approfondissement* of the preceding section” (*CR* 14). Despite numerous disagreements and repudiations, Bersani remains, in important ways, Proustian.

Like Proust's, Bersani's work constitutes a structure in which “[e]ach present is an inaccurate replication—or, as I now like to call it, a re-categorization—of all our pasts.”⁵ When a thought is “recategorized,” it is rendered, as Bersani continues in an interview, “a little more precise, or more expansive. It's as if later versions of certain thoughts keep spiraling out with new additions. It's a strange relation of undoing but not quite undoing what you've thought.”⁶ What he calls the process of “recategorization” is familiar not only from Proust's but also from the psychoanalytic theorist Jean Laplanche's work. It is in psychoanalysis, and particularly the characteristics of the Freudian thought that Laplanche has elaborated, that we find the second important source for the spiraling-deepening movement—*approfondissement*, recategorization—of the Bersanian oeuvre. Bersani repeatedly draws our attention to the proximity of Proust and Freud. He often posits that Proust is the most psychoanalytic of novelists: “Proust,” he writes, “. . . has given us the most incisive and thorough representation of what we might call the psychoanalytic subject” (*IRG* 157).⁷ Observing this, he is not speaking of any particular character in *À la recherche*. Rather, it is the novel itself that evinces a psychoanalytic logic. As he continues in the preface, “the spiraling movement of Proust's novel, its development from the central point of 'Combray' into ever widening concentric circles of drama and analysis, confirms Freud's claim, in the first chapter of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, that nothing is ever lost in mental life.”⁸ What Bersani describes as peculiar to Proust and Freud is readable—if only in ways that require complication—in terms of the temporality of “traumatic repetition,” a structure where something in an originary coming-into-being is missed and hence calls for a retrospective—*nachträglich* or *après-coup*—repetition. For psychoanalysis, the X of the present marks the spot of a buried corpse, which we must unearth

to discover whom we will have become. Experience becomes accessible through the labor of retrospective re-collection, a series of returns to the scene of the crime, where something crucial, a clue to being's mystery, has remained undiscovered. This something calls the subject with the force of a *fascinating enigma*: an intimate other, from whom we have become estranged in a moment of an originary trauma, holds the key to our being.

Laplanche argues that, because Freud was the progenitor of a revolutionary account of the human subject, he was only partially able to render explicit that which he sought to theorize. Instead, the Freudian text comes to exemplify, to recapitulate, the dynamic of its object: human consciousness. One of the tendencies of anthropogenesis that the Freudian text repeats is the constitutive betrayal of the traumatic scene of origination, a betrayal that necessitates recurrent returns to witness that which has taken place at the (missed) origin. This produces the peculiarly human time of afterwardsness—as Laplanche suggests we translate *Nachträglichkeit*—whose tempo modifies also the twists and turns of Freud's self-betrayals.⁹ Laplanche argues that afterwardsness is characterized not so much by circularity as by a spiral compulsion. “A fruitful thought,” he writes of the psychoanalytic mode of thinking, “would be the one that could, at least at times, rise from the plane of the circle, and transform its circular movement into a deepening one [*approfondissement*].”¹⁰ If he gives us a “spiral model,” spirality in his conceptualizations indicates that “we go back over the same themes but make some progress with them.”¹¹ As Bersani writes in his second book, *Balzac to Beckett: Center and Circumference in French Fiction* (1970), in this involutive movement “a restatement of the past creates new possibilities for the future,” a claim that he identifies as a “psychoanalytic assumption” (BB 203). Bersani will call this mode of involution “recategorization”: differences are introduced to the self, which nevertheless retains what Proust would call its “fundamental notes” (see MP 111–21). In Laplanche and Bersani, this description obtains an ontological validity. As Bersani continues in *Thoughts and Things* (2015), “We spiral forward in time, which means that moving forward is indistinguishable from a relooping movement backward. Our futures are relooped, spiraling pasts” (TT 69). It is a process where, as Laplanche writes, “I change and am the same.”¹²

The claim that Bersani is Proustian and Freudian is at once uncontroversial and in need of elaboration, for throughout his work he insistently, and increasingly, distances himself from both Proust and psychoanalysis. To put it differently, his thought spirals away from Proust and Freud, only

to return to them with the gift of their alienated being, contaminating the origin with its perverse truth. This movement of “betrayal” is a characteristic operation in Bersani’s thought. One of the ways Bersani betrays Proustian and Freudian thought is by reconsidering them beyond the schemas of privation that he claims are constitutive of their ontologies. In the above description of Laplanche’s reading of Freud, for example, Bersani would, particularly in his post-1980s work, question the dominance of the *traumatizing scenario* in the account of consciousness and artistic production. He would propose that the insistence on traumatic origination forces us into a specific model of desire: one that is based on castration. One way to describe Bersani’s entire oeuvre is to say that it seeks other modes of our moving-in-the-world than that compelled by an originary lack. Bersani recategorizes this understanding of consciousness through intricate readings of varied aesthetic texts: literature, film, painting, theater, sculpture. Yet, as chapter 1 will suggest, philosophically speaking it is the encounter with Gilles Deleuze’s work in the late 1960s and early 1970s that nudges him to complicate psychoanalytic ontology. This is the third context, after Proust and Freud-Laplanche, in which we situate Bersani’s work. As our study argues, it is in Deleuzean philosophy—whose paradigmatic disagreements with psychoanalytic thought are well known—that we find a contemporary oeuvre that most closely resonates with Bersani’s own thinking (even if its influence works for the most part silently).¹³ Bersani reads Deleuze already in the late 1960s; *Balzac to Beckett*, and particularly its final chapters, constitutes a record of this encounter. Bersani here becomes the first Anglo-American critic to engage Deleuzean thought; it is here, too, that his work takes on some of its most distinctive characteristics.¹⁴

Indeed, while scholarship on Bersani has frequently emphasized his psychoanalytic influences, it is important to note that his ontology takes its initial shape in *Marcel Proust* and *Balzac to Beckett*, some years before his encounter with the “French Freud” in *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (1976) and *Baudelaire and Freud* (1977).¹⁵ When Bersani reads Freud, Laplanche, and Jacques Lacan, he does this as a thinker who has already been impressed by not only Proust’s but also Deleuze’s work. Even though he initially seems less than rapt with Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972)—which he calls one of many “philosophical pastorals of pre-Oedipal desire” (FA 7)¹⁶—Deleuzeanism inflects his thought through his familiarity with such books as *Proust and Signs* (1964; see BB 235), *Difference and*

Repetition (1968; see FA 325n1),¹⁷ and *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975; see FA 319n2).

If *Marcel Proust* enfolds everything that Bersani will say about Proust—but enfolds it in a form whose unfolding or actualization is predictable only in retrospect—it is in his few subsequent texts that we find the preliminary articulation of his entire body of work. In terms of his philosophical sources, *Balzac to Beckett* is important in demonstrating Bersani's early reading of Deleuze; the following two books—*A Future for Astyanax* and *Baudelaire and Freud*—evince the entrance of psychoanalytic theory, particularly Freud's and Laplanche's, onto his orbit. We might say, not at all ungenerously, that after this nothing new happens in Bersani's work. By the end of the 1970s, his thought has gained its most distinctive forms, ones that are elaborated—*nachträglich* repeated and betrayed—in his subsequent work. There is, as Bersani notes in the 2013 preface to *Marcel Proust*, “a profound continuity” in his body of work.¹⁸ “I’m not interested in variety very much,” he admits in an interview. “People have said to me, ‘You already said that twenty years ago.’ Well, fine. That simply means that it was an important idea and it’s remained an important idea but I’ve found ways to recategorize it, to play with it in a different way, adding something, changing something. I think that’s all very important. I think that’s what Proust does.”¹⁹

This self-assessment indicates a distinction between his work and much of what will have developed as poststructuralist theory, influenced by the same generation of (mostly French) thinkers whom Bersani discovers in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Unlike scholars who take their cues from Derrida’s deconstructive philosophy, he remains stubbornly disinterested in the discourses of “difference” that proliferate as something like an onto-ethical commonsense in his contemporaries’ work. Indeed, he will occasionally argue that such discourses have come to enjoy, by the late 1980s, an uninterrogated hegemony. Rather than “difference,” Bersani seeks “essence,” the *bête noire* of much of contemporary theory. In this sense, despite its impact on a number of scholarly fields—literary criticism and theory, queer theory, film and visual studies, cultural studies, psychoanalytic theory—Bersani’s work has, at least until recently, constituted something of an anomaly in Anglo-American thought. It has been only partially recognizable to the various scholarly fields whose practitioners nevertheless make frequent appeals to his texts. At stake here are what we can call “paradigmatic differences”: Bersani has often been read through interpretive lenses that, not always unproductively, distort much of his work.

Driven by the “tort” of *torquere*, “distortion” can always be claimed as a queerly productive reading method. As Pierre Hadot notes, “very often, mistakes and misunderstandings have brought about important evolutions in the history of philosophy. In particular, they have caused new ideas to appear.”²⁰ Nevertheless, our study, in an un-Bersanian gesture of fidelity, seeks to place Bersani’s work in the philosophical frame from which it emerges in the 1970s.

Much of the strangeness of Bersani’s thought—its influence and inassimilability—has to do with his commitment to ontology. Like the related concept of “essence,” “ontology” has become the target of considerable critical energies in contemporary theory. We are frequently told to place existence before being, for any ontological system, we are reminded, proceeds by obfuscating life’s actual variety and complexity. As feminism has pointed out, such reduction has traditionally taken place according to criteria where hegemonic particularities are universalized and where other perspectives, such as women’s, are rendered partial, inadequate, or, simply, inconceivable.²¹ In the context of queer theory, Christopher Castiglia voices a parallel warning when he laments “the conversion of epistemology into ontology, of history into psychic universalism.”²² Paul Gilroy similarly critiques what he calls “the ontological essentialist view,” which has allowed the proliferation of nationalist and neonationalist discourses in diaspora politics.²³ When not “strategic,” essentialism is politically and ethically dangerous; we are hence called to move away from ontological thinking, its presumed prioritization of being over existence, essence over contingency.

Bersani nevertheless suggests that we haven’t quite finished with the question of ontology, or with the ontological concept of “essence.” He muses, for example, that “the way in which the Foucauldian suspicion of sexual essences has been picked up by queer theorists has made me almost nostalgic for those very essences” (*IRG* 39). He also writes of feeling like “an essentialist villain” amidst his deconstructive contemporaries (*IRG* 33). Even if he says this jokingly, his queer-theoretical polemic *Homos* (1995) is an effort to promote what we might call “homoessentialism.” In this effort, he shares Deleuze’s obliviousness to all the admonishments to “forget ontology” that dominated twentieth-century Continental philosophy. As Alain Badiou recalls, Deleuze “liked to say that he had no problem with metaphysics,” a striking cavalierishness amidst his philosopher contemporaries.²⁴ If we can imagine Bersani saying something similar, this is because he begins to think being—inspired, in part, by Deleuze—before ontology’s deconstruction by Derrideans in the decades to come. If critical theory in

late twentieth century has built an *ethics of difference* by following, to a large extent, the centrifugal trajectory of Derridean dissemination—which Diana Fuss calls “the most rigorous anti-essentialist discourse of all”²⁵—from his earliest work onward Bersani remains consistently fascinated by the thought of “essence,” a trait that renders his work problematic for the 1980s and 1990s “critique of essentialism.”

We can illustrate Bersani’s *speculative* orientation by turning to his queer-theoretical work, particularly “Is the Rectum a Grave?” (1987) and *Homos*. These remain his most-cited texts. Indeed, the impact of “Is the Rectum a Grave?” is such that its commanding formulations have to an extent determined our understanding of Bersani’s entire oeuvre and, arguably, obfuscated its more idiosyncratic features.

In the essay, Bersani seeks to elucidate the panic unleashed by the AIDS crisis by drawing on his earlier studies on psychoanalysis and art. “There is a big secret about sex,” goes the essay’s famous opening line: “most people don’t like it” (*IRG* 3). This is, as Bersani immediately admits, *pure speculation*: no statistics or polls exist to confirm his claim. Yet the thesis helps explain the vehemence that the spectacle of dying young men unleashed in the cultural imagination. According to Bersani’s psychoanalytic reading, “most people” don’t “like” sex (or have “a certain *aversion*” to it [*IRG* 4]) because its intensities remind them of what Freud suggests is the incipient human being’s originary relationship with the world. Freud wavered between two models with which to depict the infant’s earliest, formative experiences. On the one hand, he proposed that the small human’s orientation to its surroundings is one of “nonsexual aggressiveness.” In this model, objects are puppets whose strings the child imagines pulling in an effort to overcome his lack of control over their presence or absence. Such aggressive fantasies bind the forces of a world where the being that is becoming human is stymied by a protracted stage of defenselessness, having arrived on the scene too early. Yet, alongside this pathos of imagined mastery, another model emerges, one that Laplanche suggests Freud does his best to dismiss because of its radical onto-ethical implications. In such texts as “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes” (1915) and “The Economic Problem of Masochism” (1924), Freud speculates that the infant first meets the world not through efforts of control but by ecstatically yielding to its devastating forces. This surrender—which Freud calls “primary masochism”—may have an evolutionary function: the infant survives overwhelming odds by founding its self on the pleasure of its

own annihilation. The aporetic *jouissance*—aporetic because it indicates the simultaneity of the emergence and the undoing of a self—is subsequently sought and avoided as the most profound human experience.

Bersani proposes that, on this side of death, the experiences of sex and art bring us closest to the constitutive trembling of our being. It is this model that for him explains the fascination that those dying of AIDS exert on the public imagination. It is not only that we consider painful death a fitting punishment for those revealing, and reveling in, the obscene truth of our profoundest pleasures: that we eagerly seek our own annihilation. The sadistic glee elicited by the other's pain also indicates our *masochistic identification* with such suffering. We are captured by these scenes because in witnessing them we are brought close to re-experiencing our originary *jouissance*. While we spend most of our days avoiding the lure of this undoing—for which Bersani borrows the term *ébranlement* from Laplanche and the Marquis de Sade—we should, instead, follow its call and use it to challenge “the sacrosanct value of selfhood,” in whose defense much violence is deployed (*IRG* 30). The gay men Bersani speaks of in “Is the Rectum a Grave?” are exemplars of the *radical passivity*, the will to disappear and fall silent, that he has, in his previous work, identified in varied artistic experimentations. Like Beckett’s mud crawlers, gay cruisers are artists of ontological debasement, perilously experimenting with the unpalatable truths of becoming-human.²⁶

The force of the argument concerning *ébranlement*—much of it having to do with the thrilling bombast of the essay’s rhetoric—is such that the complications with which Bersani immediately supplements his conclusions have been easy to miss. If sex, in its capacity to render the subject unavailable as a seat of power, should become “our primary hygienic practice of nonviolence” (*IRG* 30), the cultivation of shattering can also be done by a subject as a passively sadistic voyeur. As much as Lacan identifies Kantian ethical disinterestedness with the coldness of the Sadean torturer, Bersani implies that it may be in Sade that we find the truth of the psychoanalytic subject that Laplanche outlines for us.²⁷ It is not only that sex unbinds us into passivity; the subject, seeking the repetition of its pleasurable suicide, can also end up taking the world down with him. The antisocial subject, celebrated by some queer theorists, may turn out to be a suicide bomber. In reading “Is the Rectum a Grave?” one should, then, observe the ways in which the psychoanalytic assumption of an ethical *ébranlement* is immediately—one is tempted to say, always already—recategorized. As the present study will suggest, much of such

recategorization takes place through the complication of psychoanalytic ontologies with concepts that resonate with those in a philosophical genealogy whose best-known contemporary representative is Deleuze.

Despite its inability to move beyond an ontology of lack, or to imagine a nonsadistic subjecthood, Bersani never quite lets go of psychoanalysis. What remains compelling in Freud is the speculative daring of his thought, the “extraordinary speculative risk[s]” (*FrB* 99) he courts. Freud pushes his “speculations”—Bersani uses the term insistently—beyond all evidentiary plausibility, aiming at something that, like dreams, can be remembered only as the traces of secondary phenomena, only after they have undergone several rounds of revisions. In *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (1986), Bersani reads Freud as an artist of collapsing narratives and failed argumentation, someone trying to live by the constitutively muddled logic of his dreams. From the beginning, Freud exhibits a remarkable willingness to “lose[] himself” in “*blocked but productive speculation*” about pleasure, masochism, sublimation, and so forth (*FrB* 102). Rather than learning his lesson from early blunders, he compulsively repeats the failure, as if relishing the pleasure of having his arguments veer out of authorial control. This is what makes reading Freud a little bit like having sex or experiencing art. When Bersani speaks of Freud’s oeuvre as a series of “radical speculative movements” that at once invite and defy the turning of his insights into institutionalized practice (*FrB* 3), he means that this speculativeness is originary, “of the root.” Freud’s work is “radical” because, in an unprecedented way, it yields to the self-defeating, aporetic logic of the entity it describes. Psychoanalytic discourse follows the fate of the human subject, whose deepest nature is the compulsively repeated failure to speak of its traumatized constitution. Psychoanalysis recapitulates this movement: its “revolutionary nature . . . consist[s] in a speculation about its own unreadability” (*FrB* 101). If the Freudian revolution is, as Laplanche puts it, “unfinished,” it remains so constitutively.

Bersani identifies this repeated “collapse” as both “speculative” and “aesthetic.” The Freudian failure amounts to an “estheticizing movement,” he writes (*FrB* 11). He wants to own this as his own mode of thinking: as he observes in an endnote to *The Freudian Body*, his own work, whether or not explicitly addressing Freud, is “informed by a certain type of psychoanalytic speculation” (*FrB* 118n2). In light of this, we are obliged to extend our indictment of Bersani’s villainy from the charge of essentialism to that of speculativeness. By this term, we mean to evoke the maligned strand of Western thought called “speculative philosophy.” As John Dewey

writes, the phrase denotes “[a] form of theorizing which goes beyond verifiable observation and reflection, characterized by loose and venturesome hypotheses.”²⁸ In twentieth-century philosophy, Gerhard Schwenckföhl observes, “the terms ‘speculation’ and ‘metaphysics’ [have] been reduced to insults for attacking mere guesses and weird supernatural ideas”; “there is often a certain reluctance, not to say distaste,” notes another expert witness, “with which [the speculative orientation] is treated.”²⁹ While the suspicion concerning the speculative orientation extends at least to what is arguably the rise of modern thought in Martin Luther’s theology,³⁰ it is with German Idealism that “speculation” becomes a coherently deployed concept for the first time.³¹ The best-known moment in this modern history of speculative thought is its reining-in by Kant. “A theoretical cognition is *speculative*,” he writes in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, “if it pertains to an object or concepts of an object to which one cannot attain in any experience.”³² Instead of the speculative reach for the in-itself, thinking must acknowledge its inherent limitations: only objects that conform to mind’s conditions can be thought. This postulation of “correlationism,” as Quentin Meillassoux calls it, has been recently taken on by proponents of “speculative realism,” who identify in it the unquestioned commonsense that has guided all poststructuralist theorizing. Speculative realists have set themselves the task of overcoming such strict Kantianism, which, according to them, has determined the limits of modern philosophy for generations of thinkers.³³

Even before speculative realism, of course, the Kantian epistemology has not gone unchallenged. In the 1812 preface to the *Science of Logic*, Hegel laments Kant’s “renunciation of speculative thought,” the stipulation that “the understanding ought not to go beyond experience, else the cognitive faculty will become a theoretical reason which by itself generates nothing but fantasies of the brain.”³⁴ Like recent speculative realists, Hegel sought to escape Kant’s epistemological prisonhouse. He considered his predecessor’s refusal to approach things in-themselves a form of philosophical cowardice. The Kantian thinker is a traveler who stays home because he is scared of the arduousness and unpredictability of the journey. In avoiding the speculative, Kant steers clear of “the pathway of *doubt*,” “the way of despair [*der Weg des Zweifels, der Weg der Verzweiflung*],” which for the Hegelian sojourner is the only way to honor thinking.³⁵ In ruling out realms of thought rather than earnestly tackling them in their difficulty, critical philosophy is motivated by “the fear of falling into error.”³⁶ Kant becomes “the frightened philosopher.”³⁷

Instead of relinquishing being to noumenal shadows, Hegel plans for us a journey where “the speculative” emerges as the most advanced mode of thought, superseding the dogmatism of “the understanding” and reconciling the concepts’ internal contradictions that “dialectical” thought will have revealed. Hegelian speculativeness is a strictly internal process of reflection, of the mind’s turning in on itself—as if to face a mirror (*speculum*)—and working out the strangeness that it encounters there. The speculative subject is characterized by the kind of immanence for which Hegel’s system is often celebrated: a movement in which being unfolds self-reflectively, where contradictions in search of solution remain internal to the subject. In the grammatical terms in which Western metaphysics has often been thought, the “predicates” of the speculative being are no longer accidents and contingencies but “inhere” in the subject. In “argumentation” or “ratiocinative thinking” (*das Räsonieren, das räsonierende Denken*), carried out in predicative propositions, the “Subject constitutes the basis to which the content [as accident and predicate] is attached, and upon which the movement runs back and forth.”³⁸ Predicative propositions assume a passive subject, a material, inert self that is given form—stamped, as it were—by the predicates that it receives. For us to be truly thinking, we must renounce this being that passively receives a world of contingent events. In the speculative mode, the status of the subject and the predicate shifts so that the clear distinctions on which empirical propositions rely are dissolved. The predicate no longer functions as a generality attached to a preexisting subject. Rather, this passive subject “perishes” (*geht zugrunde*) as, moving to the realm of speculative thinking, we find that “the Predicate is really the Substance, the Subject has passed over into the Predicate, and, by this very fact, has been sublated.”³⁹ Herbert Marcuse writes: “The speculative judgment does not have a stable and passive subject [like common sense or traditional logic]. Its subject is active and develops itself into its predicates. The predicates are various forms of the subject’s existence.”⁴⁰

In the speculative proposition, we have, as Rodolphe Gasché continues, “the absolute identity of subject and object”: the predicate becomes “the very substance, the essence of the subject. The subject of the ordinary proposition becomes lost in the substantial essence of the predicate in the speculative proposition.”⁴¹ Speculative philosophy assumes an *essentialism* of the notion or concept. Ventriloquizing Derrida, we might say that the relation between the subject and the predicate becomes “undecidable” in the speculative proposition: the two are characterized by the peculiar

dynamic that Derrida calls “supplementarity.” Yet, notwithstanding our deconstructive generosity, the Hegelian speculative remains stubbornly essentialist. In its engagement with things, it “distinguishes their essence from their accidental state of things.”⁴² As Hegel puts it, undoing the untroubled or inert (*unbewegt*) subject of ratiocination, speculative thought actualizes the “pure self-movements [*reine Selbstbewegungen*]” of concepts.⁴³ In becoming speculative, thought is lifted out of the world of “material stuff” in which it is mired (*versenkt*); it reaches purity and solitude, the realm of concepts’ self-becoming.⁴⁴

As one might imagine, Hegelian speculativeness has not fared well with subsequent thinkers. It should be immediately clear, for example, why none of the representatives of speculative realism embraces Hegelian thought as a possible counterpoint to Kantianism. The Hegelian version of speculativeness remains caught in the kind of subject-centered thinking whose hegemony speculative realists want to bring to an end: it constitutes a “metaphysics that eternalizes the Self or the Mind, turning the latter into the perennial mirror for the manifestation of the entity.”⁴⁵ While Hegel’s revolutionary insight was to render the system of the spirit’s becoming radically *immanent*, he was also a staunch *idealist*, that is, a thinker whose worldview was entirely centered on human consciousness. Hegel purports to dissolve the carefully patrolled borders of Kantian epistemology; but his unremitting focus on the knowing subject becomes as destructive an order as Kant’s ruling out the in-itself as a legitimate object of thought. Like Kant, Hegel is, above all, an “abstract” thinker, one who, as the term’s etymology tells us, gazes at the world from the heights of disembodied solitude. As the rap sheet provided by Louis Althusser reads, Hegelian philosophy is “unreal,” “ideal(ist),” “abstract,” and—in a word—“speculative.”⁴⁶

Many of the following chapters will ascribe a certain “anti-Hegelianism” to Bersani’s work, a trait that we propose can be traced in part to his early involvement with Deleuzean philosophy.⁴⁷ If, as Elizabeth Grosz posits (herself loosely following Deleuze), Hegel’s philosophy affirms an ontology, typical to Western thought, premised on “an economy of scarcity,”⁴⁸ Bersani, in contrast, wants us to relinquish our “prejudicial view of lack as constitutive of desire” (IRG 138). Relatedly, if twentieth-century philosophy has all but exclusively conceptualized ethics according to a dialectical notion of “otherness,” Bersani’s early work on aesthetics and philosophy prevents him from joining what he comes to call “the cult of difference” (IRG 34) and, instead, pushes him to experimentations with “sameness” or, to use his coinage, “homoness.”⁴⁹ And if “lack” and

“difference” produce in Hegelian thought a subject that “can only be understood in its movement,”⁵⁰ Bersani seeks to understand being otherwise, often in terms of passivity and immobility. All this sets his thought in contradistinction to some very Hegelian assumptions. Yet, we now posit that, like Hegel, Bersani is a *speculative thinker*. His onto-ethics/aesthetics echoes the postulations that organize speculative idealism. This does not indicate, however, that Bersani is Hegelian; it reveals, rather, the *Leibnizian* influences—or influences that found a particularly clear articulation in monadology—that inflect both his and Hegel’s thinking.

The terrain implied by this ambitious triangulation can be outlined in the following way: In his early work, Hegel considers the monad a potential example of self-determination (*Selbstbestimmung*), of a being that follows its own voice (*Stimme*), actualizes its own destiny (*Bestimmung*). Yet, the contrivance of “preestablished harmony” indicates to him that Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’s system does not achieve the level of conceptual thinking (*begriffliches Denken*). Supported by the *deus ex machina* of the supreme watchmaker who sets the world in synchrony, the monad falls short of self-positing; determinations in monadology are not, as Hegel concludes in the *Science of Logic*, “raised into speculative Notions [*nicht zu spekulativen Begriffen erhoben sind*]”⁵¹ If Leibniz fails the rigors of speculative thought, Hegel picks up the slack in the *Phenomenology*. There “the speculative proposition” achieves the self-determination that would have been the monad’s. Hegel deems his own speculative idealism to have succeeded in becoming the philosophy that Leibniz audaciously, but ineffectually, sought after.

According to Marx and Engels, Hegel, notwithstanding his dismissal of Leibniz, embraced the worldview of seventeenth-century metaphysicians, whose systems assume a disembodied, solitary subject, typical of the speculative tradition. In this view, Hegel revives Western tradition’s idealist abstractions, undermining the work of the eighteenth-century French thinkers whose materialism Marx and Engels deemed to have been part of the movement that manifested itself in the revolution that toppled the *ancien régime*.⁵² While Marx and Engels also name Descartes, Malebranche, and Spinoza, it is Leibniz who engages in the headiest of modern philosophy’s “wild speculation.” Indeed, when subsequent critics comment on Hegel, they frequently evoke the excesses of his speculative idealism by using Leibnizian terms. Judith Butler, for example, writes that the subject of “speculative metaphysics” is most often “the subject of internal or psychological harmony who is at once—at least potentially—in harmony with the world of objects and others”; such a “unified subject is

a theoretical requirement, not only for the moral life, but for the grander effort to secure a preestablished metaphysical place for the human subject.”⁵³ More frequently than “preestablished harmony,” it is “the monad” that is used as shorthand for speculative assumptions. In these accounts, the Hegelian subject figures as a direct descendent of the Leibnizian monad. Like those of the speculative proposition, the predicates of the monadic subject “correspond to” or “agree with” its being. Nothing that happens to this subject can be an accident or a contingency; every one of its predicates is contained in its concept. Consequently, as much as the Hegelian speculative is marked by “pure self-movement,” the monadic subject’s being unfolds according to a strictly internal logic. Leibniz writes in the *Monadology*: “the monad’s natural changes come from an *internal principle*, since no external cause can influence it internally.”⁵⁴ Leibniz aims—but, for Hegel, fails—to conceptualize what Hegel in the *Science of Logic* calls the “self-moving soul, the principle of all natural and spiritual life.”⁵⁵

Especially after Marx’s critique, Leibniz’s radicalization of Aristotelian predication—which we will explore in more detail in chapter 1—has often been taken as a moment where Western metaphysics reveals its hidden truth: that it is, in fact, not of sound mind. Too compulsively logical for his—and the metaphysical family’s—own good, Leibniz pushes the wrong-headed propositions he has inherited to their ridiculous extremes. Like the nutty relative, the revealer of family secrets, he betrays the idealist aporias undergirding much of classical thought. *Monadology* constitutes, as critics write, a “fantastic and arbitrary” “fairy-tale”; it is “so obviously false” that the mind boggles why anyone would propose such a system; it deserves a prize as “the most absurd theory of truth that has ever been advanced.”⁵⁶ For Marx, Leibniz’s monadic ontology provides a nicely revealing portrait of the bourgeois *weltanschauung*, in all its delusional glory. He argues that, contrary to what Leibniz, and then Hegel, assumed, the travails of the human spirit do not unfold centrifugally, beginning with an internal principle that then makes its mark on the outside world; becoming-human should rather be understood as a *centripetal* process, where human “essence” is produced in a network of social relations.⁵⁷ As he puts it in the sixth thesis on Feuerbach, “the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual,” but “the ensemble” of relations in which each is embedded.⁵⁸ A year earlier, in 1844, he writes, critiquing the Young Hegelians, that “man is no abstract being encamped outside the world.”⁵⁹ The same year—and in the pages of the same publication, the sole issue of *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*—he famously adopts the

Leibnizian monad to trope the bourgeois abstractions against which he polemizes: in “On the Jewish Question,” he likens the abstract individual to the monadic isolate, “withdrawn into himself [*als isolierter auf sich zurückgezogener Monade*]”.⁶⁰ It is this agent that he will in *Grundrisse* (1939 [1857–58]) call a “Robinson Crusoe,” the imperial being at the center of Adam Smith’s and David Ricardo’s economic theories.⁶¹ For Marx, as for his followers, the monad comes to figure the self-possessed actor of the marketplace who refuses to acknowledge his embeddedness—often his privileged position—in a network of labor relations.

In twentieth-century thought, Marx’s gesture to Leibniz is repeated in assessments that find in monadology the apotheosis of Western philosophy’s idealist indulgences, its relentless, speculative egocentrism. Explicitly or implicitly, Bertrand Russell, Jacques Derrida, Jean Laplanche, Fredric Jameson, and James Miller borrow from Marx the concept of the “monadically self-reliant agent,” rendering it the decontextualized, dehistoricized ipse whose delusions have been codified in metaphysics’ authoritative formulations.⁶² In his early work, for example, Derrida deconstructs Husserlian phenomenology by directing his Socratic gaze to Husserl’s frequent references, especially in the fifth of *Cartesian Meditations* (1931), to Leibnizian metaphysics; he speaks of the transcendental ego as “the egological monad.”⁶³ In largely corresponding ways—and clearly influenced by Derrida—Laplanche argues that the radical rethinking of otherness in the Freudian revolution goes astray when the monadic ego reasserts itself in various guises in psychoanalytic theory.⁶⁴ Like Derrida and Laplanche before him, Jameson finds in the monad, again in an echo of Marx, a name for “the bourgeois ego.”⁶⁵

Even as the “monadic individual”⁶⁶ remains for many a symptomatic representative of classical philosophy’s egocentric excesses, it is perhaps the outrageousness of the Leibnizian system that has attracted other writers to explore it as fertile ground for all manner of speculative thought. In its flagrant absurdity—it is “quite unthinkable . . . as a serious project”—monadology remains, as Ian Hacking puts it, “fascinating.”⁶⁷ For Walter Benjamin, the monad, as the nonextended singularity that “involves” the whole world, figures as a concept with which to think the unpredictability of messianic becoming in contrast to the steady unfolding of dialectical history.⁶⁸ For Theodor Adorno, the monad refers to the administered society’s “liquidated” individual, whose isolation renders him susceptible to fascism and can be undone only through “solidarity.”⁶⁹ Yet, at the same time, the independent sphere of art carries a potentiality that, like

Benjamin, Adorno often describes by turning to Leibniz's system. For Deleuze, the monad figures the incorporeal principle of individuation, one that *exceeds* but doesn't *precede* its embodiment in mattered bodies. And, straddling art and philosophy, Samuel Beckett often borrows from what he admires as Leibniz's gallery of "splendid little pictures" to outline the nonrelational being that seeks silence in his texts.⁷⁰

To contextualize Bersani's essentialism and speculativeness, *The Essentialist Villain* situates his oeuvre on this continuum, which stretches, often unnoticed, across the work of twentieth-century thinkers.⁷¹ In Bersani, the monad constitutes what Laplanche calls a "crypto-concept," a concept that, "although it forms the object of no individual article or specific presentation, plays an important role in the structure of the system, even if this role is only a provisional one."⁷² The "monad," that is, functions in the Bersanian text in the same way that "*supplément*" does in Rousseau's work or "*plasticité*" in Hegel's. As Catherine Malabou writes in her study on the overlooked centrality of the notion of "plasticity" in Hegelian thought, when we discern the organization of a text around such concepts, "something essential" becomes "suddenly recognizable"; a crypto-concept reveals to the reader "something accidental . . . that [brings her] to the essential."⁷³

In large part, the following chapters read the Bersanian oeuvre as a playful echoing of monadology. Apart from observing Bersani's frequent allusions to monads, we can commence by noting the resonance between, on the one hand, Leibniz's depiction of "preestablished harmony" as "the mystery of the universal connection between phenomena"⁷⁴ and, on the other, Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit's affirmation of an "essentially mysterious connectedness in the universe" (FV 46). For them, this connectedness bespeaks what they call "the total relationality of being" (AI 140; see also CR 77–78): "*Everything*," they declare, "connects to and within the wholeness of being" (CS 99). A similar insistence on the faultless continuity of being characterizes, in Leibniz, the continuum: "all existing things are in intercourse with each other";⁷⁵ given "the plenitude of the world," "there is no vacuum in place and time, . . . nor is there a place which is not full."⁷⁶ Bersani and Dutoit's argument that "there are no gaps, no empty spaces, in creation" (CS 72)—or, as Bersani writes, that "there are no leaps of being" (FA 327n2)—may be understood in the context of Leibniz's *lex continuitatis*: "*nature never makes leaps*";⁷⁷ a principle that was subsequently adopted in the natural sciences by Carl Linnaeus and Charles Darwin. Bersani's ontology, as it develops through a series of readings over the course of his work, bears a Leibnizian character.

Our turning to Leibniz, and his “apparently bizarre metaphysics,”⁷⁸ is motivated by the sense in which, in terms of Bersani’s work, monadology is included in what Henri Bergson would call “ontological memory,” a field of the virtual whose potential is reduced by our (necessary) focus on the immediate present and the immediately present. We propose to relinquish for a moment our “pragmatic” engagement with what is directly recognizable in Bersani and dilate our focus by tracing the genealogy of his thought, through various sources, to monadology. This détente allows us to highlight the oddity that Bersanian ontology has constituted in contemporary critical theory. The intention is not to identify Bersani’s system with Leibniz’s, if this gesture would mean the uncovering of a solid blueprint that the former’s work faithfully reproduces. Leibniz’s name, it should be noted, gets merely a couple of references in Bersani’s extensive oeuvre.⁷⁹ For us, “Leibniz” designates not an author or a doctrine but what Derrida calls “the name of a problem,” a framework that, often in undetected ways, informs the articulation of a discourse.⁸⁰

It is in this intellectual context that Hegel and Bersani share the orientation of their Leibnizianism. If Hegel’s speculative subject gives us “the development of a simple interiority,”⁸¹ Bersani seeks in monadism a principle of the subject’s relation to the world that would differ from the form of otherness or difference whose often unacknowledged hegemony he discerns organizing the thought of Freud, Proust, Laplanche, Benjamin, and Butler. If monadology’s role in Bersani’s thought has not been noted in the by-now voluminous scholarship on his work, such elision may be the result of the paradigmatic incompatibility—perhaps, in Leibniz’s terms, incompossibility—of theoretical perspectives.⁸² The gravitation of Bersani’s philosophy toward this indivisible singularity announces the grounding difference between his work and the commonplaces of contemporary Anglo-American cultural and critical theory that has taken its cues from Derrida’s early texts.

When we call Bersani a “speculative” thinker, we should, however, carefully detail the charge. In *Thoughts and Things*, Bersani briefly discusses the work of Lawrence Krauss (we’ll return to this moment at the end of our study). Krauss is one of the most recent—and most controversial—contributors to what has been called “speculative astronomy,” a field for which the work of the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximander is often cited as foundational. If speculative astronomy deals with “hypothetical objects,” describable only on the evidence of the effects they have on other, “observational” objects, it shares its method with the speculative

philosophy whose hypothetical object has traditionally been God or Being. The observable functions, as St. Bonaventure put it, as an obscure mirror (*speculum*) where traces (*vestigia*) of divinity can be apprehended.⁸³ In this sense, Bersani is *not* a speculative thinker. Without fail, his onto-ethics/aesthetics limits itself to an observational object: the work of art. For him, artworks are not “representational” in the sense that observable phenomena are for speculative philosophy or speculative astronomy: they do not indirectly express divinity or tell us about the unrecoverable conditions of the universe. In an endnote appended to *Caravaggio’s Secrets*, he writes with Dutoit that “the aesthetic” can be considered “the concretizing or sensualizing of the metaphysical” (CS 110n9). He echoes this point when he asserts in a later interview that art “bring[s] being into the phenomenological.”⁸⁴ Yet we must note that what is here termed “being” or “the metaphysical” is not distinct from that in which it can be observed. “The work of art,” Bersani and Dutoit continue in the endnote, “is the site where the world reappears—and appears for the first time—as the ‘correspondences’ (to use a Baudelairean term) that design, and perceptibly fail to design, the always mobile unity of phenomena” (CS 110n9). In Bersani’s work, “art” constitutes the field of “experience” that speculative thought, in its abstractions, is often said to bypass. It is through varied experimentations in the “ontological laboratories” (CS 59, 63) of literature, philosophy, and the visual arts that Bersani extracts and (re)formulates an onto-ethics/aesthetics where, as in the aesthetic theory of Charles Baudelaire, the world’s (re)appearing is understood as an *aesthetic event*.

In *The Freudian Body*, Bersani suggests that, when this emergence takes place beyond what we recognize as art, we must extend our conception of “the aesthetic.” (Freud’s work, for example, evinces this “estheticizing movement”; we should, therefore, approach it as we would an artwork.) Indeed, thinking of the aesthetic as “art” is a way to demarcate and domesticate this dynamic, to “territorialize,” as Deleuze would say, its forces. In much the same way that, as Freud suggests, we routinely neutralize our singular death-orientation by externalizing it as aggressiveness, restricting the experience of the aesthetic to the field of art is one of the ways in which we have learned to escape the *jouissance* of our becoming. Bersani’s gesture of deterritorialization is to suggest the potential everydayness of this event. This is what he implies when he asks, in the endnote in *Caravaggio’s Secrets*, “[A]re there definable conditions under which the real qualifies as ‘art?’” (CS 110n9). His work can be understood as an effort to articulate such conditions, whereby our lives

could begin to function as art, to participate in the “estheticizing movement” that also marks Freud’s speculative theory of hominization. We can unlearn, he suggests, our extant modes of being in the world; we can be retrained in the *aestheticization of our lives*. This retraining entails what Bersani, borrowing the term from Beckett, often calls “impoverishment”: we must undo the habits by which we have marked our territory, plugged into—made ourselves recognizable to—the world. In ways that we will consider in the following chapters, this program shares a considerable deal not only with the onto-ethics of the later Foucault but also, for example, with Georg Simmel’s *Lebensphilosophie*.

Yet, even if Bersani does not deal with “hypothetical objects,” he remains, like Hegel, a speculative thinker. This is because his onto-ethics shares with Hegelian idealism—and Leibnizian monadology—the effort to think being strictly in terms of *an internal principle*, of what Hegel calls “the speculative proposition.” Marx indicated the folly of this enterprise. For him, and critics following him, Hegel’s insistence on this internal logic constitutes his breakthrough and his tragic error. His emphasis on the dialectic as a process that unfolds in the solving and dissolving of its internal contradictions allowed the conceptualization of history as an immanent process, purged of all otherworldly alibis (including the preestablished harmony). Instead of resorting to the interventions of transcendent otherness, we realize that “what seems to happen outside of [substance], to be an activity directed against it, is really its own doing.”⁸⁵ This argument has had enormously enabling consequences in subsequent, and particularly twentieth-century, conceptualizations of history, politics, and becoming.⁸⁶ Yet as in all great tragedies, the Hegelian system’s triumph is inextricable from a devastating hamartia. If Hegel’s thought owes its remarkable force to the immanence of the speculative movement, this internal logic has also rendered the Hegelian sojourner a figure for an imperial self. While some recent commentators—most notably, Catherine Malabou and Jean-Luc Nancy—have observed the “shakiness” of Hegel’s system (indicated, for both Malabou and Nancy, in the “plasticity” of the unity in which the speculative construction is supposed to have found its telos),⁸⁷ most readers, influenced by Marx, have considered the Hegelian subject the philosophical version of the bourgeois agent of the “Robinsonades” of late eighteenth-century economic theories: Robinson Crusoe in his imperial, monadic solitude.

The precise limits of the analogy between Bersani’s and Hegel’s onto-ethics need to be traced out more carefully than we can do here.