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Splitting the Difference: Aesthetic Relations in Henry James and Leo Bersani

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A key thread running through Leo Bersani's remarkably diverse oeuvre is his exploration of modes of subjectivity that are capable of forming relations with others and the world in ways that avoid the aggression of the traditional subject/object relation. From his early work on Marcel Proust, Balzac, Baudelaire, Henry James, Samuel Beckett and Sigmund Freud (among others[1]), to his recent collaborations with Ulysse Dutoit on art and film in works such as *Caravaggio's Secrets* (1998) and *Forms of Being* (2004), Bersani queries the subject's prevailing tendency to violently "transform the world into a reflection of subjectivity".[2] Psychoanalysis, in Bersani's view, has been particularly egregious in this respect. Starting with Freud, and continuing with Melanie Klein and Jacques Lacan, psychoanalysis has traditionally conceived the subject as set irremediably apart from the object, whose intrinsic foreignness necessitates an array of complex defensive psychic strategies. Klein's monstrous conception of the "bad object" is perhaps only the most graphic instance of this prevailing psychoanalytic tendency to regard the ego as in a relation of "radical hostility to the external world."[3]

It is in the field of visibility that Bersani seeks his alternate conception of relation. In his essay, "Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject", Bersani invites us to consider how certain similarities or "correspondences" between the forms of

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[1] *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and of Art* (London: Oxford UP, 1965), *Balzac to Beckett* (New York: Oxford UP, 1970), *A Future for Astyanax* (1969), *Baudelaire and Freud* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1979), *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1990), *Homos* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1995), *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981).

[2] Leo Bersani, "Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject," *Critical Inquiry* 32 (2006): 162. Hereafter cited in the text as Aesthetic Subject.

[3] Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 87.

objects (and subjects) of the world might lead to a conception of a "universal relationality" that frees us both from the "antagonistic dualism between human consciousness and the world it inhabits and the anthropomorphic appropriation of that world" ("Aesthetic Subject," 161). Precisely what Bersani has in mind with his idea of formal correspondences requires further elaboration but it comes down to a politically and morally revised conception of likeness that he offers as an alternative to the aggressive subject/object relation. In *Homos*, for example, Bersani invites us to consider how André Gide's *The Immoralist* reveals the extent to which "our bodily being 'touches' multiple other surfaces to which it is drawn, not necessarily by desire but perhaps primordially by formal affinities that diagram our extensions."[4] In Bersani's hands, Caravaggio's paintings, certain works of contemporary film and the masterpieces of High Modernism become vehicles for intriguing discoveries of how identities of shape, texture, color and volume come to exert strange attractions upon one another. Drawn together by purely *formal* isomorphisms (or "correspondences"), such shapes, textures, colors and volumes occupy space in ways that he maintains are fundamentally ontologically different from the dual relation of subject and object.

On an initial impulse, one might regard such "correspondences" as embodying the symbolic blueprints for a new mode of being that (potentially) follows from the bodily ego's self-shattering during the experience of jouissance (whose dimensions Bersani has explored at some length[5]). It is as if, in art's "ontological laboratory"[6] – which describes both certain kinds of aesthetic practices and a revised understanding of the psychoanalytic notion of fantasy Bersani develops in "Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject"[7] – segments of what had formerly

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[4] Bersani, "The Gay Outlaw," *Homos* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995) 121.

[5] See, for example, his essay, "Is the Rectum a Grave" in the book of that title (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[6] Bersani, and Dutoit, *Caravaggio's Secrets* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1998) 63.

[7] This is developed most fully in Bersani's essay, "Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject." In it, he writes, "[…] if fantasy is a major site of our connectedness to the world, it is not an act that touches or changes the world. It represents the terms in which the world inheres in the fantasizing subject,

comprised the subject begin to regroup and, along with other bits of the shattered world, form a unity of being organized according to laws other than those prescribing the division of self and other. The world or "whole" thus constituted sees the ancient dualism of subject and object displaced, superceded by a distorted, flattened, homogenous manifold in which the firm distinctions between human and nonhuman, subject and object, merge and ultimately become obsolete. However, Bersani's use of terms such as "diagram" and "extension" also gives us the clue as to how to understand the transformations of our representational space at play here. It is a topological space Bersani appears to be proposing – one whose deformations of our habitual representational field are effected not through the creation of new cuts and divisions, but by way of topology's perspectival shift that enables us to see previously undisclosed continuities and correspondences across what looked, from another perspective, to be independent and separated objects.

Insofar as it refashions our approach to objects topologically, then, Bersani indicates that art and certain other kinds of aesthetic and intimate experiences, free us to experience the dimension of virtuality. Virtuality, for the critic, forms the "unthinkable, intrinsically unrealizable reserve of human being" through which "we connect to the world" ("Aesthetic Subject," 169). Interestingly, it is to Impressionism (among others) that Bersani looks as an instance of an artistic practice capable of reconnecting us with our virtual reserve. In the previously mentioned essay on Gide, Bersani takes time out from his consideration of the character of Michel to quote John Berger approvingly on how Renoir's scenes with naked women exhibit signs of this other mode of being in the world: "Within the dappled skins," Berger writes, "'there is nobody': the trees, rocks, hills and sea beyond the bodies 'prolong and extend the same paradise'" (*Homos*, 120). Bersani glosses this as Renoir's realization of "a potentially universal visibility" (*Homos*, 120) from which all pressure of desire has been emptied and with it, the formerly "politically unfixable antagonism between itself and the object" in which the subject

terms that can change as our position in the world changes." Aesthetic Subject, 170.

has traditionally been immobilized (*Homos*, 124).

In what follows, I would like to explore Bersani's conception of non-coercive relationality through a consideration of Henry James's short story, "Flickerbridge".[8] First published in *Scribner's Magazine* in 1902, "Flickerbridge" is one of a series of James tales that explicitly takes up the problem of representation and the ethical dilemmas it introduces vis-à-vis its object. Pitting the literary and visual arts against one another in a mock-heroic ethical battle, James's tale offers fruitful ground for exploring how different artforms, and their accompanying styles, might figure a non-desiring relation to the world differently – a question of no small interest to Bersani himself.[9] In a manner particularly germane to this discussion, James invites us to consider the ethical responsibility that inheres between the artist and the object of his or her representational practice.

As is true of several of the tales in this group, which include "The Real Thing" (1892), "The Real Right Thing" (1899), "The Special Type" (1900) and "The Papers" (1903), in "Flickerbridge" James anchors the narrative around the prospective dangers represented by that hungry beast, the "cannibal" of publicity. Frank Granger, a promising young American painter, finds himself unexpectedly in possession of a great marvel. Invited to the old stately home, Flickerbridge, to recover from an illness contracted on an assignment in England, Granger becomes captivated by "one of the sweetest, fairest, coolest impressions of his life" (721). The creature in question is his fiancee's long-lost elderly cousin and namesake, Miss Adelaide Wenham. Miss Wenham, we quickly learn, belongs to the estranged British side of his betrothed's family, whose existence has only recently come to Addie's (Frank's fiancée's) knowledge.

A prolific up-and-coming short story writer, Addie is a contributor to a "prominent Boston paper" and other "public sheets" that serve as the organs for

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[8] Henry James, "Flickerbridge," in *Henry James: Collected Stories*, sel. and intro. John Bayley (New York: Knopf, 1999).

[9] See "Aesthetic Subject", 164.

her descriptive pieces (716). Having being sent to Flickerbridge as her "deputy," Granger develops a growing fear that by meeting Miss Wenham, Addie will unwittingly "ruin" her cousin by inevitably "raving" about her existence to the world. Although Frank is confident that Addie will share his unique appreciation for the "queer", the "rare", the "*impayable*" (721), he fears she won't partake in his delicate scruples. And if Addie were to write about their extraordinary find – as she certainly would – the hordes would flock to Flickerbridge, as Frank rather extravagantly warns Miss Wenham:

> She'll rave about you. She'll write about you. You're Niagara before the first white traveller [...].You'll be too weird for words, but the words will nevertheless come. You'll be too exactly the real thing [...] and all Addie's friends and all Addie's editors and contributors and readers will cross the Atlantic and flock to Flickerbridge, so, unanimously, vociferously to leave you. You'll be in the magazines with illustrations; you'll be in the papers with headings; you'll be everywhere with everything. (James, 730)

To avoid this fate, Frank resolves to try to keep Miss Wenham and Flickerbridge to himself. The temptation to try to conserve her in her original state is simply too great:

> He would close the door on his impression, treat it as a private museum. He would see that he could lounge and linger there, live with wonderful things there, lie up there to rest and refit. For himself he was sure that after a little he should be able to paint there - do things in a key he had never thought of before. (729)

As James hints in this passage, Frank's encounter with Miss Wenham is nothing less than the discovery of a radically new "style". Previously steeped in the "the newest impressionism", in whose "vagueness", "dim light" and "inscrut[ability]" (715) (for which his and Addie's own obscurely articulated relation is perhaps the most profound symptom), Granger marvels at the sudden clarity of the image before him: "He had been floated by the strangest of chances

out of the rushing stream into a clear still backwater - a deep and quiet pool in which objects were sharply mirrored" (722). Miss Wenham herself strikes him as the most perfectly executed signpost transporting him to an earlier time: "Her opinions were like dried roseleaves; her attitudes like British sculpture; her voice was what he imagined of the possible tone of the old gilded, silver-stringed harp in one of the corners of the drawing-room" (728). The rooms at Flickerbridge exude the fragrance of the old days "as rare as some fine old print with the best bits down in the corners. Old books and old pictures, allusions remembered and aspects conjected, reappeared to him" (723). Above all, "[t]he image before him was so rounded and stamped. It expressed with pure perfection, it exhausted its character" (722). As Frank tells the bewildered inhabitant of Flickerbridge, "You fit your frame with a perfection only equalled by the perfection with which your frame fits you" (726).

Strikingly, in the passage I've been discussing, Granger's aesthetic education unfolds in exact inverse to Bersani and Dutoit's narrative of growing depersonalization and collapsing of boundaries. In fact, the deepening focus and exquisite definition of "type" that Granger discovers in Flickerbridge calls more immediately to mind a certain *realist* style, reminiscent of the earlier Dutch painters and their finely drawn still lifes. Thus Flickerbridge, in Granger's perception, hovers before him in the fullness of its pellucid outline and delicate detail: "Oh, it was there," James has Frank silently muse, "if that was all one wanted of a thing! It was so 'there' that […] he had held his breath for fear of breaking the spell" (721). With his new appreciation of realism, moreover, Frank acquires new artistic scruples:

> To look at it too hard was positively to make it conscious, and to make it conscious was positively to wake it up. Its only safety, of a truth, was to be left still to sleep - to sleep in its large, fair chambers, and under its high, clean canopies. (724)

The question is why being seen should pose such a threat to Miss Wenham?

For Frank, what is at stake is nothing less than Flickerbridge's integrity as an object. Simply by becoming visible - or, at least, visible in a certain kind of way - Flickerbridge is in danger of losing its singular being. As James puts it dryly, "the process of reproduction, as we say, costs" (723). From this perspective, Frank's extravagant fears for Miss Wenham's safety recall nothing so much as the overly scrupulous Kantian who refuses even to apprehend objects because he believes that by transforming them through perception into phenomena, their noumenal selves are in ontological danger. It is far better, ethically, to leave them alone, as Frank explains. "I should next find you simply brought to self-consciousness. You'll be exactly what you are, I charitably admit - nothing more or less, nothing different. But you'll be it all in a different way" (733).

Here James's motif of the mortal danger represented by publicity assumes a more ontological register than in many of his tales around this theme. For as it transpires, the threat represented by Addie and her raving ilk is simply the extreme end of a continuum of a malignant shift into visibility that begins irretrievably with Frank's own vision of Miss Wenham. What interests is how this circumscribing shift into the visible defines what Bersani calls the "psychoanalytic gesture" par excellence. In this gesture, through which the subject separates itself from the external world, the object acquires a mysterious hue. Divided from the subject by the "realist" cut psychoanalysis calls the signifier, the object finds itself elevated to a mysterious signifier that can henceforth be approached only as something for the subject to appropriate (through desire), assimilate (through sublimation or "knowledge") - or, as in Frank's case, fled from.

As we saw, Bersani's notion of formal correspondences aims to undo the dualism introduced by the representational act - and its concomitant ethical dilemma which Frank feels so acutely - by redrawing the subject/object relation in a topological manner. In his discussion of Pierre Michon's *L'origine du monde* in "Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject," Bersani formulates the narrator's relation to the world in terms of a Möbius strip-like "looping movement" wherein

the world finds itself in the subject who reciprocally finds itself in the world. "There is neither a subject-object dualism nor a fusion of the subject and object", he writes (Aesthetic Subject, 168-9). "What the world finds in the subject (in addition to physical correspondences) is a certain activity of consciousness, which partially reinvents the world as it repeats it" (169).

My question is whether there might be a way of rethinking the "psychoanalytic gesture" in a way that doesn't automatically throw us back into the ancient dualism Bersani and Frank both deplore? My suggestion is that in "Flickerbridge," James offers us a representational model that delivers a similarly "looping movement" between the subject and the world as Bersani detects in Michon, but this is accomplished by way of the very ("realist") division that caused the original separation. To understand this, we must recall how in the Lacanian narrative of the 'primordial cut' by which the subject assumes a representational (i.e. linguistic) identity, an alienation of the subject within itself takes place that is isomorphic to the alienation of the subject in the world. For once having assumed representational form in the shape of a name or the linguistic shifter "I", the subject is thought to be cut off from its being, which comes to circulate in the outside world in the form of an object, but an object of a strange and uncanny kind. This object is what Lacan calls the object (a), a fascinating, glittering object that forever hovers tantalizingly out of our reach. As linguistic subjects, we deputize ourselves, as it were, to the signifier, while our "real" being slips away into the now objectively constituted world, to hang there as an alluring testament to our divided state.

With this in mind, let us return to an important aspect of James's tale that cannot have escaped the reader: the peculiarity of James's decision to have both of the important women in Frank's world bear the same name. Given James's well-known interest in and careful selection of his characters' names, this choice cannot help but strike one as singular.[10] On a first reading, this doubling of the two

[10] Millicent Bell, "Henry James: The Man Who Lived", *The Massachusetts Review* 14. 2

women's names might be thought to draw attention with a pleasing symmetry to the two choices confronting a subject in its encounter with the object: on the one hand, the choice to approach it through the desiring relation – with all the connotations of appropriation and violence that this relation entails (presented vividly in James in the exaggerated and exhorbitant fears that Frank projects onto Addie). Or we can approach it through an aesthetic relation, conceived as a mode of seeing and being that is more sensitive to the dangers that any form of representing it (which apparently includes simply viewing it) may bring to the object.

But I think that to endorse this second option is to fail to do justice to the sheer oddness of Frank's 'aesthetic' relation with Miss Wenham. Taken straight, Frank's behavior towards Miss Wenham strikes us (not to mention her) as immensely bizarre, an outlandish parody of representational scruples that James, in a playful moment, is satirizing. For it is, furthermore, by no means implied at the end of the tale that Frank's renunciation of both Miss Wenhams might be in any sense an ethically satisfactory outcome. The problem with this reading, I believe, lies in its mistaking Frank for the *subject* of the tale, whereas his actual position is more fruitfully understood another way. Recall how Frank's role in this tale is as the representative of Addie, whose task – to reconnect her with her long-lost relation – he signally fails to accomplish. However, there is a sense in which Frank succeeds all too well if we understand his mission from a psychoanalytic perspective, as the task of the signifier to represent a subject for another signifier. As a "deputy" for Adelaide Wenham, Frank's goal is not his stated one, that is, of joining the two divided halves of the subject: the literary or "linguistic" Adelaide Wenham with her objective correlative in the glittering form of a past unity of being, Flickerbridge. In fact, his task is the opposite: to maintain these two halves of the subject in a state of permanent separation. In Lacanian terms, we could say that, as a signifier, Frank's mission is to create the perceptual frame through which

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(Spring, 1973) 391-414.

the object (a) – "Flickerbridge" – may be viewed by the divided subject. But his success in doing so depends upon the signifier's ability to sustain the gap separating the two worlds, that is, to maintain the representational fiction that there is some "real thing" – some previous unity of being – out there in the objectively constituted world, that might be recovered given the right circumstances, or right approach or, indeed, right mode of representing it. This necessary gap between the two worlds – a gap which is, furthermore, produced by the originating split in the subject, rather than its cause – bestows our representational (or, in Lacanian terms, "symbolic") field with its illusion of perspective and depth, enabling the subject to "see" itself in the object world. To the extent that it provides the original coordinates for the subject, it is the signifier that delivers the sense of space to the objective world, enabling the subject to orientate itself within it. All space, in this sense, is fantasmatic, a flickering bridge forged by the signifying cut that, "in a singular story of a sharp split" (718), first divided the subject from its being.

Understood in this way, the traditional conception of the subject as something inherently opposed to the object begins to unravel. For in the Lacanian narrative, both the subject and the object *share the same split*: the cut that divides the subject from itself is the very same as that which divides the subject from the object world. In James, in other words, we find a looping movement isomorphous to that which Bersani discovers in Michon but in James's case, what the subject and world share in common is a mutual diremption, rather than mutual form or corresponding shape. Their "correspondence", that is, is a corresponding split or division.

Could we not say that here James effects a further turn of Bersani's screw, revealing the obverse side of the critic's intervention? Bersani's supreme insight is to perform the topological perspectival shift that enables us to perceive identities across what previously appeared to be separate objects. In "Flickerbridge", James exposes the logical structure of that perspectival shift: when cut twice down the

middle, the Möbius strip-like surface of Bersani's subject/world relation unpeels into the looping intertwined S-shapes of the subject/Other and the extra little o-shape that, as a remainder, dangles off one of the loops of the 8.[11] The same cut of the signifier that divides the subject also divides it from the world.

"Flickerbridge" appeared in February 1902, the same year as *The Wings of the Dove* appeared in its American and British editions. Widely recognized as the first of James's "major phase" novels, *The Wings of the Dove* is renowned as James's foray into what would become called his "literary impressionism." When read alongside the novel, "Flickerbridge" might be thought of as a meditation and reflection on James's own discovery of a "new style", and as an exploration of the internal logic of the perspectival shift he enacts in his later "impressionist" work. "Flickerbridge" suggests that James regarded his stylistic innovation less as a radical break from his earlier realism than as realism's 'correspondent form'. Although, like Bersani, James comes to emphasize surfaces rather than depths in his later work, this tale's extended reflection on the conditions of possibility of representation - and their ethical import in relation to the world - point to James's sophisticated understanding of the mutual imbrication of both representational styles. The same can be said of Bersani for whom James evidently continues to act as a key signifier or coordinate, as the little kernel of the Real(ism) at the center of his impressionist explorations into surface worlds.[12]

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[11] Lacan frequently comes back to the Möbius strip and other topological figures throughout his writings. See, for example, the discussion in his unpublished Seminar XIII, The Object of Psychoanalysis (1965-1966), lesson of 15.12.65. He explains how 'the [castrating] cut itself has the structure of the surface called Möbius strip. Here you see it pictured by a double stroke of the scissors that you can also do, in which you would effectively cut the total figure of the projective plane, or of the cross-cap as I called it, in two parts: one Möbius strip on the one hand, here it is supposed to be cut, all on its own, and on the other hand a remainder which is what plays the same function of hole in its primitive shape.'

[12] See for example his nested discussion of James's The Beast in the Jungle in his essay on Patrice Leconte, "The It in the I: Patrice Leconte, Henry James, and Analytic Love," *The Henry James Review* 27.3 (2006): 202-14.