

**Henry James's Virtual Beast**

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Leo Bersani has in different ways and at different times of his career asked the same provocative question: is it possible to depart from the fundamental structures of desire that constitute one's identity as a coherent or consistent being? That one should want to do so is not exactly self-evident, and it is the achievement of his extraordinarily compelling critical oeuvre to make the case that a fixed, stable sense of self and the normative ideals that cultivate it may inhibit rather than enable vigorous, dynamic forms of relationality. In effect Bersani suggests that the encouragement to "be oneself"—to be psychologically as well as morally law-abiding—may be nothing more than an ideological ruse grounded in two assumptions: first, that one is "at bottom" consistent, and second, that in consistency lies communal stability and happiness. But these are prescriptive social ideals that masquerade as laws. To quote Wyndham Lewis, those who think that they are "'expressing' their 'personality'" merely reveal "somebody else's personality they [are] expressing" (The Art of Being Ruled 164). These ideals have as their ultimate consequence not redemptive civilization, but rather an often dangerous form of melancholy, which tends to lead to lives of unfulfilled desire that are capable of unleashing considerable violence at self or others.

On the face of it, the underlying claim is curious, coming as it does from the pen of a psychoanalytic critic. After all, psychoanalysis would seem to take for granted a sedimented, repetitive personality lying beneath surface manifestations of self, which the theory claims are shaped by certain formative events early in one's personal life. That is, discontented with a superficial sense of self, psychoanalysis enforces precisely those patterns of interpretation that validate a belief in psychic consistency. But for Bersani, there is not just one psychoanalytic theory but many. The version he extols rebuffs the civilizing mission of the later Freud, with his teleological narrative of psychosocial development, which enforces structured lives, heterosexual

marriage, and the sublimation of desires. He returns instead to Freud's account of the structurally indefinite forms of childhood sexuality, with their painful excitements, "shattering" identifications, and intensely disruptive energies. At their origin, one's desires appear to be mobile, fragmentary, and discontinuous, enabling ambiguous erotic extensions of self that blur boundaries between individuals. He does not relegate these desires to the sphere of childhood alone. They are capable of emerging at various moments within adult life. Indeed the very fact that desire has, in its original formation, an anarchic and unpredictable force would seem to demonstrate that it will not let itself be relegated to the earliest stages of infantile sexuality. Bersani's early book, A Future for Astyanax (1975), contemplates moments when personality dissolves into a series of fragments, preventing the boring continuity of a self whose passions are stipulated by society. The characters he examines have lives that buck normative social regulation and are thus more experimental and various. This line of thought, over the course of years, has led Bersani to his most recent book, Intimacies (2008), about novel forms of relationship that develop precisely when the individuals concerned return to the impersonal forms of narcissism first expressed in infancy. This is a period before the ego fully establishes itself by identifying its difference from others. As a child one lives perpetually suspended in a state of becoming. Paradoxically to return to the desire of the past is somehow to lift one into the unpredictable future.

Bersani has, perhaps more insistently than any other critic, opened up psychoanalysis to an interest in the imminence of change. He would like to work out a story about intimacy that, as he puts it, prefers "the possibilities of the future to the determinations of the past" (Intimacies viii). Throughout his career, he has borrowed from vitalist discourses, chiefly the ideas of Gilles Deleuze, mixing them freely with an original exposition of psychoanalysis. Yet one wonders

whether the way that he connects the future to the past symptomatically limits how he imagines the very future he invokes.

For a test case, Intimacies begins, as has been Bersani's wont on a number of occasions, with a work of fiction by Henry James, in this case, "The Beast in the Jungle." The story, which takes shape as a "cautionary tale," would seem to be an eccentric choice precisely because, superficially anyway, it is the story of a relationship going nowhere. The protagonist John Marcher waits out his days on the premonition that some event of apocalyptic or at least ferocious import is destined to take over his life. Refusing to marry on the basis of this mysterious secret presentiment, he leads his whole life with the dubious sense of his own distinction as a man for whom great events are fated, only to find himself deluded and alone at the end, a sufferer of an insolvent, impoverished life.

Bersani offers one of two great re-imaginings of this story. The first came more than twenty-five years ago when Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argued that Marcher's secret is that "he is imprisoned by homosexual panic" (206) and that May—rather than helping him fortify his fantasy—instead attempts to help him dissolve it by coaxing him out of his painful self-ignorance. For Sedgwick, as for Bersani, "time and intersubjectivity are of the essence of the secrets" (Sedgwick 205) that pass between them, and both cast May in a therapeutic position. As Sedgwick understands the relationship, May is invested in reflecting back to Marcher his desire as a means of deepening their mutual intimacy: self-knowledge offers him "a route back to his truer perception of herself" (210). Bersani explicitly works against the grain of the sort of "humanistic" reading that Sedgwick offers. As he indicates at the outset of Intimacies, he wishes to question pervasively held sentimental axioms such as, for instance, the idea that "knowledge of oneself is conducive to intimacy, that intimacy is by definition personal intimacy, and that

narcissism is the enemy, the saboteur, of this personal intimacy considered to be the source and medium of personal development” (vii-viii). Sedgwick accepts some share of these assumptions despite the otherwise melancholy lesson she draws from the story. For his part, Bersani thinks that James stalls a conventional romantic narrative itinerary in order to allow Marcher to live out his past, which dictates the precedents of his own desire in the form of a suspended future, one that is always yet to come. Instead of receiving “guarantees of self-validation” from May, he takes part in a stranger relationship premised on an act of mutual waiting, with its own perpetually transforming process, at least until, to Bersani’s dissatisfaction, James speaks of Marcher’s involvement with her “as if it were an affective and moral failure” (*Intimacies* 24). May Bartram’s position is more equivocal in Bersani’s account. She sacrificially withholds avowal of her love for him. But as somewhat meager compensation, she would seem to preside vicariously over his life in the form of a guardian spirit, which allows her the pleasure of her own self-abandonment. Her relations with Marcher take an ardent but impersonal form, even as her own fate is entwined with his and in the same state of suspense.

One remarkable quality of Bersani’s reading is that it is ultimately so vague. This is part of a deliberate interpretive strategy. He refuses to “fill in” Marcher’s secret by giving it content, as Sedgwick does. In this respect, he avoids reproducing the protagonist’s own distorted forms of interpretation, forms which seek to penetrate beneath appearance in order to find “the real truth” behind his life, which is liable, he thinks, “at any moment to rise to the surface” (James 46). Marcher correlates this postulated truth with an event outside the self, while depth models of psychology presume that it comes from within. However the result is the same. For the belief that such a truth exists has the effect of discounting the surface of everyday existence, of life as an ongoing, unfinished project. Marcher’s equivocal fantasy that a “Beast” will spring at him,

“altering everything, striking at the root of all [his] world” (James 39), would seem to stand as an admonitory cipher for such a style of interpretation, since the event that he envisions would guarantee his singularity as an individual, but only by threatening to annihilate his being. In the story, such an event does not occur. Yet in the process of waiting for it to break out suddenly, Marcher does not credit the life that he is creating by virtue of his belief. Why is he so resistant to an everyday mode of being? And why does he adopt such an unreasonable, faintly clownish fantasy of self-importance? Bersani does not attempt to evaluate the qualitatively specific terms of Marcher’s investment. He treats the “interminably prolonged prospect” (*Intimacies* 22) of his fate—which looms before him as an event whose origins are at once “remotely past and indefinitely future”—as the structuring condition and meaningful upshot of his life, whether he recognizes it or not.

For Bersani, the elusiveness of the unnamable catastrophe that Marcher anticipates and the indefinite pronoun “it” used to refer to the event point in all of their emptiness to the pure potentiality in fantasy that defines his existence. The fantasy’s meaning emanates from unnamable feelings from the past, yet it is prospective. It remains in suspense, shifting like the signifier “it” that James uses to refer to the shadow of fantasy. As Marcher would have it, it is nothing so ordinary as falling in love, with all of its attendant dangers. And yet, as a fantasy, it is clearly bound up with his desires. Rather than a singular “happening,” punctual and definable, it indicates a multiplicity, a repertoire of impulses, of possible attitudes and scripted incidents, at once unacted and yet to be acted. As such, this “beast in the jungle” is, in the language that Bersani adopts, purely “virtual.”

Presumably he picks up the concept from Deleuze, who picks it up largely from Henri Bergson. They use it to refer to relations or interactions between things that remain potential, but

not yet actualized. Bergson likens the virtual to an “afterimage,” the ghostly hologram imprinted on the retina after one gazes at an object (Bergson 102). This impression reflects off of the object one’s possible action upon it. The virtual is a form of potentiality that coexists with the realized state of an object, radiating new consequential directions and outcomes. It suggests the set of actions or prospective effects that lead to the ongoing transformation or alteration of a state. By remarking on the virtual character of fantasy, Bersani allows one to think of it not simply or primarily as a set of reiterated patterns, the work of sedimented structures of desire, but rather as a repertoire that sketches out new, yet to be consummated outcomes. In this way, as we shall see, Bersani grants the virtuality of time an astonishing psychic dimension.

All the same, it is worth noting the compromises to which he has to submit the virtual in order to assimilate the concept to a psychoanalytic configuration. He locates a streak of negativity in it, a resistance to its own realization. The virtual has to preserve its empty character in order to sustain its openness to the future. Yet this virtual state, as Bersani describes it, leaves one practically detached from life. The result is something close to the state of mind that Bergson attributes to the dreamer, one whose memories are “useless or indifferent” and who is not well “fitted for action” (153). Dreamers occupy one unbalanced polarity of mental life. A human being who does nothing but dream fails to translate “the infinite multitude of the details of his past history” (155), each of which offers a virtual template for impending action, into constructive impulses. John Marcher is just such a man. According to Bersani, he “is a virtual statement—and of nothing in particular” (24). As “a life lived as pure virtuality” (24), he dwells unsatisfyingly in his own head. The scenarios that Marcher imagines, which are distillations of erotic drives, never take root outside of his imagination.

Bersani conceives of the relationship between May Bartram and John Marcher by analogy to an encounter in a psychoanalytic session. By refusing to legitimate the intimacy of the pair in specifically erotic terms, James expounds their relationship as mere talk. This symbolic talk is premised on an agreement not to have sex, like psychoanalysis itself, in Adam Phillips's cheeky characterization. It allows Marcher to improvise other non-standard forms of intimacy. Within the contained stipulations of their exchange, he can play out any number of potential outcomes in his mind in the safe knowledge that none will come to pass as a "real" love interest. Thus May enables him to experience the indeterminate "it" by which James refers to the "beast" as an open possibility.

This image of a "crouching beast" stands for Bersani as an apt metaphor for the Freudian id or "it" as he prefers the translation. In Freud's structural model, Das Es or the It refers to that portion of the unconscious that contains repressed sexual impulses, yet in Bersani's re-reading, it might better refer to "the reservoir of possibility, of all that might be but is not" (25). Rather than dwelling on the negative work of the unconscious, its restraining force, which is bound to defensive processes, he insists on its virtual character. This way, the unconscious It has an ontologically constructive function: it allows desire to compose the variations of impulse that lead to psychic change. At the same time, this It is unconscious because it exists at a level that precedes any specific psychic determination of it. Thus Marcher's "It"—his beast—constitutes the "impersonal dimension of psychic being" (27). Bersani proffers this reading of the psychoanalytic unconscious as an alternative, as he says, to "the more orthodox view of the unconscious in depth-psychology as behind or below consciousness" (25).

It is important to Bersani's argument that there be a prescribed gap between Marcher's desire as he constitutes it in fantasy and his ensuing reality. In his reading, James bestows upon



May Bartram the task of maintaining this disparity. She refuses to substantialize the fantasy that casts a constant weight over his life. Marcher attributes to her a special prevision of his own expected end. Little by little, as James remarks, he begins wondering whether she had “even a larger conception of singularity for him than he had for himself” (James 44). At the same time that she looks at his life, “judging it, measuring it, in the light of the thing she knew” (44), she adopts a constitutive reticence about the character of the beast that they refer to, between them, as the “real truth” about him. In order to allow his desires to range in indeterminate directions, Marcher needs May Bartram to keep back her impression of the unspecified cataclysm. She appears to “know” that his expectation of personal disaster is in fact nothing, at least no “precisely dated catastrophe” (*Intimacies* 22) as Bersani terms it. By the same token, she sustains his curious sense of the anteriority of the fantasy. When they meet at Weatherend, only she remembers that they have met previously and that, years before, Marcher related to her his curious secret. Her memory reminds him of something lost to himself. What she jogs in him is not a precise feeling for his impending event, but rather the fact that his desire is imperfectly determined, that the fullness of his past is barred to him. It would appear that there is nothing at the origin of his desire except the tantalizing suggestion of a more authentic reality, which he can only experience as yet to be.

By this account, May’s reticence is at its most salutary when it communicates no substantive knowledge at all. In this way, James can preserve the “purity” of his protagonist’s desire. That is, he fulfills the “law” of desire in its most austere form, at least as Lacan conceptualizes it, which imposes a lack or absence (*manque à être*) at the heart of being. Only thus, Lacan thinks, can one generate the chain of substitutions that propels desire forward. However, by presenting this psychoanalytic configuration of desire as an expression of virtuality,

Bersani pushes the concept in a deeply non-pragmatic direction. Marcher does not have to do anything to achieve the meaning he craves save to fantasize about it. In essence, Bersani deems desire to be purely virtual only when it remains disembodied and, as it were, empty. Such desire is perpetually divorced or rather suspended from all possibility of realization or satisfaction. From a Lacanian point of view, the capacity to assume one's desire requires that one recognize the insatiable nature of its demands. One must cease to think that any particular object will finally fill the void in one's being. By being ethically more aware of desire's vacuity, one is better able to deal with it or what one is by virtue of it. Bersani implies something further: preserving an empty or "pure" form of desire is a stimulus to more desire. Yet one wonders whether in Marcher's case this is really so. He seems to gain little by leading such an ascetic life. Rather than accept that desire is an expression of lack, one might conceive of it after the fashion of Spinoza, as an appetite for things that increase or extend one's capacity to act (Spinoza III.II.148). From that standpoint, Marcher offends against desire by yielding to an idea that hinders him from fixing on any meaningful choices, making him frustrated and feckless. His detachment from life leads to passivity, and his ascetic ideal is closer to Nietzschean nihilism—with its corresponding abdication of agency—than to the monkish practices of Medieval Catholicism that Bersani honors for its ego-divesting discipline. What Marcher lacks is the experience of life as a compelling erotic project, one that can draw out his desire.

Bersani picks a source text that seems obsessed with exploring how a life might be lived as a virtual experiment. But the form of virtuality on offer in "The Beast in the Jungle" is much more compromised than he grants. In his attractive effort at avoiding a moralizing reading of the story, he has to dismiss much of the irony that James weaves into the narrative. He declines to treat the story as one of "missed passion," but he tends to assume that it is primarily about

intimacy. He pays scant attention to the character of Marcher's bizarre fantasy as a structuring condition for that intimacy. Yet we might ask what his fantasy is in the service of, why Marcher presumes to hope that "he is being kept for something rare and strange" (39), in effect, without having to work for it. He says of the beast, "it isn't anything I'm to do, to achieve in the world, to be distinguished or admired for. I'm not such an ass as that" (39). Doubtless to do something is to have some idea of what one is to do, to give the virtual some shape, however preliminary. This is precisely what Marcher disavows. As May understands from him, he wants something all to himself—"something that nobody knows or has known" (40). His redemptive fantasy of singularity renounces any effort to realize it himself. He is not willing to find or create the terms for his own interest in life out of the scraps and materials available to him. In this respect, he is the parody of an aesthete, passively acceding to an abstract sense of destiny without concerning himself with any particulars of the moment or taking pleasure from them. His feeling of aridity or emotional bankruptcy at the end is the result of a fantasy that takes the open-ended nature of any person's future as something to be predicted, frozen, and delivered with its interest already formed for it. In his unsanctified, unconsecrated present, he does not know what this interest is but assumes that it will force itself upon him in a convincing way merely by appearing. In this respect, he does not regard his future as the ongoing product of his own making.

In the meantime, Marcher lives his destiny in a perpetually suspended tense. James remarks, "It was in Time that he was to have met his fate" (James 53), a fate that, Bersani observes, "is temporalized as both prior to and subsequent to its happening, as if it were a kind of being, or a form of law, inherently incompatible with the very category of happening" (*Intimacies* 20). James's use of so many subjunctive and perfected verb forms in the story empties out the present. In this way he underscores the absence of active agency or progressive

ascent into a future. Perhaps the tense form that Marcher experiences most relentlessly is the future perfect—the tense that allows him to examine his life from some indeterminate but approaching date that retrospectively casts a glow of significance on his otherwise hollow existence. This may be the reason that May Bartram’s use of the subjunctive form of this tense so threatens him in one of her first moments of ambiguous dissent from his fantasy. She tells him that his fate “has come in its own form and its own way, all the while” and then follows up, “Only, you know, the form and the way in your case were to have been—well, something so exceptional and, as one may say, so particularly your own” (47; penultimate emphasis mine). As if to underscore the threat that the suppositional mood of this statement casts on his whole enterprise, he looks at her with suspicion, repeats the phrase, and accuses her of beginning to doubt. From May’s point of view, he would seem to project before him a moment of hindsight, a perception after the fact, that he can experience only in the mode of a hypothesis. He cannot confer ownership upon it except in fantasy because such a moment requires an endpoint whose monumental finality is impossible to live. As he himself conjectures early on, meeting his beast may well destroy “all further consciousness” (39), annihilating him, or at least altering who the “he” is beyond all recognition. In her subtle way, and despite her own apparent confusions, May seems to grasp the unworkable and contradictory conditions of such a fantasy.

Earlier I referred to “The Beast in the Jungle” as a cautionary tale. My sense is that like a number of other shorter works of James’s, it presents a distorted mirror of the very same concerns that he explores in many of his longer novels. It reveals the life of a man who cannot quite accomplish the feat that Bersani exalts and that characters like Maggie Verver in The Golden Bowl or Strether in The Ambassadors accomplish: the feat of shaking off the fixed burdens of the past in order to extemporize more variable and more creative forms of desire. The

story turns the far richer forms of virtuality they project into the highly circumscribed prospects of Marcher's own stunted history, which unfolds, as May Bartram's aside suggests, "all the while." Without quite denying that fantasy is a legitimately virtual activity, the story shows how quickly it can develop in a psychologically reactive direction. The emptiness of Marcher's vision and his refusal to think in terms of qualitatively specific forms of investment circumscribe his sense of potentiality. Yet James shows how extraordinarily sensitive an instrument of virtuality the psyche is. For constantly anticipating events, Marcher is capable of modifying reality simply by construing it in a particular way through the prism of his desires. His psychological experience of potentiality bleeds into reality through its indirect effects, whether his expectation of the beast turns out to be true as an epistemic matter or not. This self-fulfilling or self-reinforcing nature of thought may be what May Bartram is getting at when she tells Marcher her verdict regarding what has happened to him: "What was to" (60). His fate follows, however obliquely and unexpectedly, from his interpolations and premises.

It should not seem too paradoxical that the writer who presents a character with such an obsessive sense of inevitability and predestination should also be one of the most committed to the open-endedness of the future, to the virtuality of time. For James treats his own vitalist impulses, as I tend to see them, with the greatest skeptical caution. Perhaps for this reason, his work has offered such sustained and such fertile grounds for Bersani's critical gaze. It remains hard to decide whether James, subtle as he is, succeeds in rupturing the integrity of his characters' psyches, the patterns of thought and behavior that keep them attached to the fixed precedents of the past. In this respect, James would seem, more than other writers, to appreciate the difficulties as well as the possibilities of such a venture. In A Future of Astyanax, Bersani itemizes some of the repetitions that are a mainstay of James's narratives: the moments of

traumatic sighting, the witnessed betrayals and glimpsed intimacies, the haunting “images of a hidden and threatening truth from which [... the Jamesian hero] has been excluded” (134). For his part, Bersani has always been genuinely of two minds as to whether these repetitions are merely incidental, reactions to local circumstances, or whether they validate a belief in the persevering compulsions of the author’s own unconscious.

Intimacies offers us a third option. Perhaps one can treat the past as a template of future possibilities or virtual resources rather than as an inflexible script. By doing so, fantasy becomes a compositional force, mobilizing desire as a means of arranging, reorganizing, and adapting the images and memories of the past, creating unprecedented diagrams of possibility in the process. Bersani has set out to recover a form of psychoanalysis that captures the fluidity, not the fixity, of the past. Yet by leaving the urgings of fantasy in a suspended state, indefinitely disengaged from any effort at actualization, his account threatens to make of it an insubstantial affair. The only way of expanding the scope of virtuality is to bring elements of it gradually to bear in one’s own actualizing endeavors. The virtual is not a static reservoir of infinite possibility that precedes any experience, but a force that unfolds from actual events. One can alter one’s course only by looking at what already is and making adjustments. By suggesting that the virtual is most saturated with possibility at the developmental starting point of the subject, Bersani allows no possibility for it to change, ripen, or develop as an immediate response to shifting circumstances.

The violent, ego-effacing, and self-shattering desires that captivate Bersani, and which are reflected in John Marcher’s fantasy of a springing beast, may, as Bersani suggests elsewhere, propel one toward the mutability of infancy, if, that is, one can avoid annihilation, but the intensities they offer bear the stamp of infancy as well. No intelligence or guiding organization may really be attributed to the ventures undertaken on their behalf. Moreover these fragmentary

and uninterpretable desires are largely negative in character. They do little more than break down conventional social identifications and pleasures, opposing the run of desires expressed for Marcher in the “usual human type” (50). Marcher’s fantasy, which fails to come into definite enough form, leads him to the “abject anti-climax” (53) that he fears. Here James intimates that he would be better off liberating himself from the idea that fantasy constrains one to reproduce the past. Bersani’s work has taught us how to recognize and value James’s effort to imagine a futurity released from the patterns and precedents of long ago. The two of us may have a somewhat different conception of what such a release would amount to. But if nothing else, all of us can, I hope, agree on honoring that prodigious insight.

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