

## THE AESTHETICS OF HANDLING

*I told my poetry students to take longer before imaginarily arriving at the artwork they wished to write about, like Jorie Graham in “San Sepulcro.” To arbitrarily complicate a path through space, as do mazes. Subsect and subsect. A number of them, including my mother, wrote about pregnancy. As they wrote, I wrote about accidentally discovering Robert Motherwell in the library, perusing artbooks. His partial shapes are my soul. His paintings foretell the books that open them. Which brings me to his dictionary, and his special love for the word open. Which brings me to my sense that refused arrivals, in my paintings, become inward openings, which are a translation of No. Which brings me to the gorgeous care involved in crafting a linguistic impasse to redirect pressure.*

—Ethan Fortuna, journal entry, 2021

*I like to begin with a whole surface then introduce a line to divide the surface into smaller sections, rather than begin with an image and try to integrate the image into the surface.*

—Robert Motherwell, *On the Open Series*, 1970

*Any sensation that crosses a certain threshold of intensity would qualify as sexual: this not only generalizes the sexual beyond the bodily areas designated as such in the dominant narrative—mouth, anus, genitals—but also allows for an impressively wide range of situations that might trigger sexual response. Examples Freud gives include riding in a train or even reading a book.*

—Leo Bersani, “Why Sex?,” 2014

### I. PRECARIETY & THE INADEQUACY OF THE SPECULATIVE

Etymologically, *precarity* derives from the Sanskrit *prasna*- meaning “to ask” (Etymologyonline.com). The uncertain state that forms contemporary understandings of precarity emerges, thus, from a scene of interlocution—more metaphysically, from a dialogic incompleteness that constitutes consciousness. Put differently, there is need expressed in the form of asking *for* something (which locates precarity in im/material dependence), and there is the incomplete relationality of being that represses itself in the form of linguistic systematicity (which makes precarity a mostly unconscious psychic condition); it is the latter of these two with which I concern myself here. This constitutive incompleteness is, in my opinion, what makes the interminable creation of meaning possible. Meaning’s interminability, in turn, produces a tension vital to the vexed endeavor of circumscribing it within a narrativizing grammar. More simply, the precarity of our linguistic co-constitutiveness inherently *resists* the forced if illusory platitudes of narrative meaning that understandings of relation—and, at stake here, understandings of power and violence—seem to rely on. I want, therefore, to consider how an interrogative openness—or assuming the

position of asking a question without the need for an answer—is a creative maintenance of spaciousness as the resistance to meaning’s closure.

The late interdisciplinary theorist Leo Bersani, however, concludes the final text he published, *Receptive Bodies* (2019), with a critique of speculation as an inadequate response to murderous violence. For context, Bersani focuses his critique on a question asked by the protagonist of Bruno Dumont’s exquisitely somber and existentially tormenting 1990 film *Humanité*. In one of his relatively few moments of speech, the protagonist police detective Pharaon de Winter responds to seeing a murder victim’s brutalized body with the bravely inane yet seemingly subdued question: “How can anyone do that?” In Bersani’s account, it is the film’s sprawling visual indifference—its enduringly directionless gaze which seems indiscriminately to absorb what enters its frame—to its thin plot or, in other words, its *extralinguistic* speculation on the “enigma of human violence” that offers what the protagonist’s question cannot: namely, a “phenomenological analysis” of a sensorial orientation to a relentlessly violent world that “not only resists all attempts to understand it, but, strictly speaking,” confronts it as “a world that *cannot even be looked at*” (7). To return to the idea of an interrogative openness, then, Bersani formulates an alternative posture in which we would *receive* the inexplicable with an unqualified sensorial openness that seeks not to understand but to relate to it by other “bodily means” (7). While Bersani asserts that the inherent inquisitiveness of linguistic form would overdetermine such an effort from the start, I argue that *poiesis* allows us to both courageously “ask” how brutality is possible *and* phenomenologically analyze the rhythmic linguistic openings which allow us to resist our preexisting and inadequate ways of posing such causal inquiries or trying to answer them.

More directly, I am suggesting that precarity constitutes a form of unqualified sensorial vulnerability to an answerless brutality that requires a phenomenological orientation of radical openness—an openness through which to counterintuitively and savingly relate to merciless violence and, by relating, resist. My tentative aim, here, is to provide a theoretical foundation for conceiving language as *capable* of producing a sensual mode of receptivity that is, to quote Bersani, “joltingly at odds” with its own “customary privileged looking, probing, and detecting,” and to share an example of a poem in which I attempt to do this (7).

## II. “WHAT DOES EARTH FEEL LIKE?”

As for the title of this piece—“The Aesthetics of Handling”—this, too (and if you know me, unsurprisingly), comes from Bersani’s final text. Before we learn and internalize the modality of knowing choreographed by a linguistic subject/object dyad, Bersani writes, we experience, as infants, an “idiom of care” produced by our caretaker’s “aesthetic of handling,” how they hold, wipe, or place us (95). I find this incredibly moving, though I would add that language is also an aesthetic of handling—in other words, a tactile exchange of weight.

Pursuing the relational stakes of gestural care to the final pages, Bersani initiates the conclusion of his text with the question: “What does earth feel like?” (91). I cried the first time I read it. Have you ever been asked this question? Can the simple act of touch restore an immediacy that a meaning’s oversignification depletes experience of? Perhaps the wholesomeness of this sentence so moved me because it comes at the

conclusion of a text that dwells intensely with extreme examples of human brutality in order, precisely, to examine the impulse toward an annihilating dogmatism often enfolded in the fantasy of wholesomeness—or wholeness—itsself. Or, perhaps, it moved me because Bersani held my weight, suddenly, by asking. We ask not only for what we need; we also ask because others need a linguistic opening in us with which to be held.

In the aftermath of experiencing great violence, it has required courage of me to resensitize myself to such a fragile awareness of the phenomenal as that unassuming question invites—has required courage of me even by being proximate to destruction; being at all in the world of its making. Bersani continues: “It is as if Pharaoh were both asking *and answering* this question when he picks up a handful of soil in his garden plot, presses it to his palm, and lets the pieces fall to the ground from between his fingers” (my emphasis, 112). Touching is, for Bersani, a form of inquisitive address akin to the question “what does earth feel like?”; the most basic gesture of a consciousness that emerges to set in motion not the ascertainment of a definition but a dialogically incomplete poiesis: not *what is it*—rather, what is it *like*? A simile lovingly fabricates tentative, qualitative resonance; a phonemic lattice (things don’t mean; they relate). How, then, is letting something *fall* from one’s grasp the answer that Bersani finds in response to the question of what it feels like? Departing from a logic of association that would restrict likeness to ontic categories of being and nonbeing, the phenomenal feels not quite like some phenomenal other, but like its protective retreat from possession.

Earth, Bersani seems to say, feels like letting go. We touch earth most when we let it fall from our grasp perhaps because, in that instant, we feel ourselves, also, drop from an insistent psychic demand that sensation endorse the given. Feeling is the opening made by the withdrawal of that preemptive significance. *Earth*, after all, (in distinction from dirt) is a dense *aggregate* of meanings that precariously holds the idea of a discrete totality together. Bersani seeks a practice of material absorption that would allow us—not to identify meaning—but “cross the psychic, moral, and social” distances such meanings deign to maintain. His oeuvre longs for the touches that manage to mysteriously sustain our sense of being constitutively greeted by a world even when it seems itself to have delivered us to the nearly or actually insufferable. This is the terrible grace of precarity; it is with us every moment.

### III. THE LACERATING DEMON<sup>1</sup>

*In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate, — no more. I cannot get it nearer to me. If tomorrow I should be informed of the bankruptcy of my principal debtors, the loss of my property would be a great inconvenience to me, perhaps, for many years; but it would leave me as it found me, — neither better nor worse. So is it with this calamity: it does not touch me: some thing which I fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me, nor enlarged without*

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from Branka Arsić’s “Nocturnal Outings: Dreaming,” *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson* (2010), in which she writes: “We cross the threshold [between waking life and nocturnal existence] every day, and at that very threshold we encounter the demon, which in its Greek sense is the power that connects while lacerating (*daimon* means lacerator, ‘he who divides and fractures’)” (99).

*enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar. It was caducous. I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature.*

“Experience,” Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1844

The damning grief Emerson feels entrapped by following his son’s death is a sort of cosmic despairing. More metaphysical perhaps, than Pharaon de Winter’s aching grasping after the always unsustainable comfort provided by psychologically causal explanations, which is to say narrative ones, for what motivates horrific violence. Emerson’s son did not, of course, die at the hands of another; he died of scarlet fever. Emerson is thus preoccupied with a phenomenological analysis of the calamitous fact that his psychic pain has no material sign—no location, shape, mark, scar. Emerson is left to tolerate the flailing apparatus of his desire to possess what is no longer there and what was never his. Thus his claim that his son’s material dispersal “does not touch” him. I have long tried to be a student of this lesson—to live without the need to possess myself. But, I am left with questions. What about the way Emerson’s relationship to the word (his son’s name) *Waldo* might change? Surely speaking it less or feeling the intricate difference of its new correlativelessness would constitute a tactile registration of the material markings of loss.

Bersani’s analysis of a materially absorptive visual and linguistic indifference to experience differs from an Emersonian dispossession. Rather, Bersani’s attempt to reconcile calamity seems to require that we ourselves *become possessed* or, to use his word, *enveloped* by an inherently alienating relational field that relentlessly disperses us, like Emerson’s son, within its unknowable being. And it is this account of an encompassing seizure that comes close to my own experience of language: the grammatical daimon that declares this is the world that *cannot even be looked at*.

#### IV. FACELESSNESS

The appeal of a non-facing orientation to the world to Bersani is a parallel to my own hope for a nonrelational way of being together in language. I live in resonant awe of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’s assertion that the face is the site from which language bursts—that beholding another’s face demands grammar of us, demands that we be so impressed upon by it we *have no choice* but return the other to themselves in speech, and that that answer *is* what we *are*. Levinas locates in the face the same signifying violence that Bersani does, only Levinas therein finds the emergence of what he calls the “good violence” of ethics. Bersani would, rather than look into your face such that he must respond to it, back into a warm wall of indifferent flesh. He wants the return of what has withdrawn from him to remain unseen. Unlike Levinas and Bersani, I think that language has the featureless tenderness of our unwitnessed lumbar; our backsides. As someone who cannot fit into the grammar that sees back, I have learned to love the unbidden.

Bersani considers a type of materiality that troubles a psychoanalytic or narrative emphasis on attachment, which he names an “unabandonable” something that is neither subject nor object—such as the air we breathe. Importantly, we must both be constitutively open within the unabandonable air we breath and we

must be able to modulate our reception of it: “The degree of the sluice’s opening is crucial: not porous enough and the subject suffers from dehydration; too porous, and the subject is flooded by the world” (99). Bersani’s “subject” appeals to me as it is at one and the same time a systemic function (a membrane) and a psycho-linguistically dilating component of the consumptive ‘outside’ world. Language is a precarious membrane—it allows for one’s durational participation in the voluminous gift of the world’s penetrating openness.

Is facelessness akin to self-effacement? It is more than reasonable to consider whether this linguistic orientation is a style of self-negation not least because Bersani, across his oeuvre, conceives of subjectivity as inherently masochistic. It is important to consider, as well, if linguistic self-negation emerges as much from a hostile rejection of otherness. For, Bersani also explicitly describes his formulation of subjectivity as what he has called a “universal homoness”—a kind of solipsistic-masochistic helplessness. Bersani’s enduring commitment to the homoness of being has seemed to account for my own spiralling experience of, first, recognizing that he astonishingly implies across his works that the gay bottom is the universal subject of language and psychoanalysis and, second (or at the same time), recognizing that I identify as a gay trans man. Am I a faceless sluice? A self-negating greeting? In a previous *Collective Task* cycle, I submitted a poem that conceives the faceless grid of grindr as a version of Rilke’s “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” and it’s been difficult (impossible) to avoid my impulse to return to grindr in this section. So I’ll end by saying: I remember when, after months of receiving dick pics from guys who presumably or explicitly identified me as a bottom, I was surprisingly sent my first hole pic. *He sees you!* my friend said.

V.

### fragment

a kind of sifting rhythm  
phased me as I agitated  
between heels, calves, where reaches  
poised--and said oh, there’s  
another knowing--ahead of  
my departure-regret, that  
would quicken it.

increasingly more easily  
endured, perhaps because  
very slowly dissipating--

loss of intent and failure to secure  
memory through devotion,  
as if devotion were sphincter

urged open by weight;  
and then stumbling sidelength--  
slower, than beige rusts of fretted sands, stoop and recover

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Bersani, Leo. *Receptive Bodies*, The University of Chicago Press, 2018.