

SOCIABILITY AND CRUISING

leo bersani

Sociability is a form of relationality uncontaminated by desire.

I reformulate in this way — in this admittedly tendentious way — the argument made by Georg Simmel in his 1910 essay “The Sociology of Sociability.” From Simmel’s description, we could view sociability as a paradoxical effect of our socializing impulses. “[T]he higher unity which one calls ‘society,’” he writes, is motivated by “interests”: “economic and ideal interests, warlike and erotic, religious and charitable.” Such interests define the content of groups. “But above and beyond their special content, all...associations are accompanied by a feeling for, by a satisfaction in, the very fact that one is associated with others and that the solitariness of the individual is resolved into togetherness, a union with others.” Indeed, “a feeling for the worth of association as such” is involved in the very motives for association, and the “objective content which carries the particular association along” may, Simmel suggests, only later be called forth. The “special needs and interests” that account for the “special content” of groups may, then, provide an inadequate account of the very origin of groups. An initiating motive of social formations would be the impulse to develop the “special sociological structure” of sociability — which is to say, a structure without motive, a structure, Simmel argues, “corresponding to those of art and play, which draw their form from these realities [those of our life interests] but nevertheless leave their reality behind them.” Like art and play, sociability “takes its substance from numerous fundamental forms of serious relationships like among men,” but it is precisely that substance which art, play, and sociability leave behind, presenting only “the pure, abstract play of form,” “a symbolically playing fullness of life.”¹

A pervasive theme in Simmel’s writing is the sacrifice of individuality required by membership in groups. “The great problems placed before [the ethical forces of concrete society] are that the individual has to fit himself into a whole system and live for it: that, however, out of this system values and enhancement must flow back to him, that the life of

the individual is but a means for the ends of the whole, the life of the whole but an instrument for the purposes of the individual.” Because of “the seriousness, indeed the frequent tragedy of these requirements,” sociability is all the more impressive in that, having carried these requirements “over into its shadow world, in which there is no friction,” they can be replayed — in, for example, “the manner in which groups form and break up at parties,” conversations get started and then break off without tragedy, allowing us to experience what Simmel strikingly calls “the freedom of bondage” (137-138). Thus sociability solves “the great problem of association”: “that of the measure of significance and accent which belongs to the individual as such in and as against the social milieu” (130). The problematic nature of groups that must at once curb and serve individuality is resolved in sociability thanks to the particular pleasure gained from the restriction of the personal: the pleasure of the associative process itself, of a pure relationality which, beyond or before the satisfaction of particular needs or interests, may be at once the ground, the motive, and the goal of all relations.

Simmel’s essay more or less takes for granted the satisfaction inherent in the abstraction of the relational from concrete relations. But why, exactly, is pure relationality pleasurable? When Simmel speaks of “the pure, abstract play of form” characteristic of sociability (129), he seems to mean a certain kind of rhythmical play. Rhythm is what remains when content is stripped away. Both the “objective qualities which gather about the personality” (“riches and social position, learning and fame, exceptional capacities and merits of the individual”) and “the most personal things — character, mood, and fate” (130-131) — have no place in sociability, although the latter does keep what Simmel calls a symbolic relation to all this content. Without content, sociability nonetheless imitates the rhythms of “real life.” In conversation, for example, it is the movement of arguments rather than their substance that excites us — such as “binding and loosening, conquering and being vanquished, giving and taking” (136). Similarly, coquetry “plays out the forms of eroticism”; it moves between “hinted consent and hinted denial,” “swings between yes and no,” stopping at neither pole, divesting sexuality of consequential decisions (134-135). As these examples suggest, the fundamental rhythm of sociability is “association and separation” (138). The particular modes of sociable conduct — such as group formation, conversation, coquetry — imitate the movement of individuals toward and away from social systems, which is for Simmel the principal object of sociological study.

Because the movement never stops, nothing essential is lost in sociability: neither the individual’s selfhood nor the advantage of living in groups. But this very preservation is nonetheless predicated on sacrifice. We live rhythmically only if we renounce possession. We do not expect economic advantages from entering into a group at a party; the “free moving play” (135) of coquetry depends on the suspension of sexual demand; sociable conversation does not definitively settle arguments. We can escape “the solitariness of the individual” and enjoy “the pure

essence of association” (128) only if we renounce, at least momentarily, the acquisitive impulses that draw us into groups. In this account, the pleasure of sociability cannot help but refer — negatively, as it were — to the conflicts and pressures generated by those socializing impulses. Sociability gives us the pleasure of *relief* from “the frictional relations of real life” (129). But there are hints in Simmel’s essay of a more radical view of the relation between pleasure and negativity. The pleasure of sociability would not be merely that of a restful interlude in social life. Instead, it would be the consequence of *our being less than what we really are*. Simmel speaks of a lady who, while avoiding “extreme *décolletage* in a really personal, intimate situation with one or two men,” feels comfortable with it “in a large company.” “For she is,” he adds, “in the larger company, herself, to be sure, but not quite completely herself, since she is only an element in a formally constituted gathering” (131). It is as if there were a happiness inherent in not being entirely ourselves, in being “reduced” to an impersonal rhythm. Here such rational explanations as an escape from the solitariness of individual life, or the relief from conflicts with others, are no longer relevant. Neither, it seems to me, is any psychoanalytic account that would trace the pleasure of sociability either to intersubjective desires or to a lost (if fantasmatic) *jouissance*. Perhaps because as a sociologist Simmel is less interested in the genealogy of pleasure than in its social nature and function, his account of the satisfaction sociability gives is at once somewhat unsatisfying and free of the assumptions governing most psychoanalytic thought. Simmel calls the pleasure of sociability an “excitement” (136), and he seems to be positing a non-sexual excitement, one that would be a function of a subject without personality, of a partially dismantled subject. Considering all the interests and passions we lay aside in order to enjoy sociability, we might speak of sociability as an ascetic conduct. It is a self-disciplining that yields pleasure, or excitement. It is not the disciplining itself that is felt as pleasure, so it would be a mistake to speak of sociability as a form of masochism. Indeed, if there is a pleasure accompanying the shedding of our interests, it is the non-masochistic one of escaping from the frictions, the pain, even the tragedy endemic to social life. Once stripped of those interests, we discover a new type of being, as well as a new type of pleasure. The pleasure does not serve an interest, satisfy a passion, or fulfill a desire. It is an intransitive pleasure intrinsic to a certain mode of existence, to self-subtracted being. A willingness to be less — a certain kind of ascetic disposition — introduces us (perhaps re-introduces us) to the pleasure of rhythmized being.

Most profoundly, the pleasure of sociability is the pleasure of existing, of concretely existing, at the abstract level of pure being. There is no other explanation for that pleasure. It does not satisfy conscious or unconscious desires; instead, it testifies to the seductiveness of the ceaseless movement toward and away from things without which there would be no particular desires for *any* thing, a seductiveness that is the ontological ground of the desirability of all things. Simmel ends his essay by proposing the ubiquity of phenomena that, like sociability, represent what he

calls the fundamental reality of being. The play, the movement, the rhythm of that fundamental reality inaccurately replicates itself in the multiple spectacles and conducts of the phenomenal world. From the awe-inspiring edding and flowing of the ocean's waves to the superficial chatter of the *salon*, being ceaselessly unveils and plays itself in creation. That a phenomenon as commonplace as sociability should be one of the bearers of this metaphysical weight perhaps suggests the lightness of the burden itself, the kind of playful, impersonal narcissism circulating within the proliferations of being. Sociability, as the great sociologist discovered, is the one social structure that owes nothing, in its essence, to the sociology of groups.

"It seems certain," Freud writes in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, "that homosexual love is far more compatible [than heterosexual love] with group ties, even when it takes the shape of uninhibited sexual impulses — a remarkable fact, the explanation of which might carry us far."²

How far? And in what direction?

Freud never fully answers these questions, although *Group Psychology* is not the only place in his work where he proposes a marked compatibility between sociality and homosexuality. Ten years earlier, in his account of Dr. Schreber's paranoia, he had spoken of the persistence of homosexual tendencies "after the stage of heterosexual object-choice has been reached." "Merely deflected from their sexual aim..., they now combine with portions of the ego-instincts and...help to constitute the social instincts, thus contributing an erotic factor to friendship and comradeship, to *esprit de corps* and to the love of mankind in general."³ Not only that: the "social instincts" are even more finely developed in those who have failed to reach the stage of heterosexual object-choice: "It is not irrelevant to note," Freud concludes, "that it is precisely manifest homosexuals, and among them again precisely those that struggle against an indulgence in sensual acts [the passage quoted from *Group Psychology* modifies this by suggesting the compatibility of "uninhibited" homosexual impulses with a special aptitude for group ties], who distinguish themselves by taking a particularly active share in the general interests of humanity — interests which have themselves sprung from a sublimation of erotic interests."⁴ Finally, in the short paper "Some Neurotic Mechanisms in Jealousy, Paranoia and Homosexuality," written in early 1921, just before he began the final version of *Group Psychology*, Freud writes: "It is well known that a good number of homosexuals are characterized by a special development of their social instinctual impulses and by their devotion to the interests of the community."⁵

What Freud means by social feeling is more general than sociability. It includes all those "interests" — the play of frequently conflicting passions and ambitions — that are, for Simmel, suspended, at least ideally, during the sociable gathering. The value of Simmel's analysis nonetheless seems to me to lie in the possibility of sociability, as he defines it, pointing,

paradoxically, to something beyond itself. That possibility has frequently been examined in literary texts — in, for example, texts as different from one another as Stendhal’s *The Charterhouse of Parma* and Molière’s *The Misanthrope*. Stendhal proposes the *salon* as a social, even a political model, thus suggesting the relevance of sociability to sociality itself. In maintaining the special aptitude of homosexuals for social feeling, Freud appears to be arguing — fleetingly to be sure — that a “devotion to the interests of the community” might be inherent in a particular mode of sexual desire. It is as if Freud were reserving a certain area of sexuality for a successfully civilized relationality — a prospect absent (forgotten?) in the fierce antagonism spelled out in *Civilization and Its Discontents* between individual happiness and the interests of society. Nothing would be more surprising than to find psychoanalysis granting this privilege to homosexuals. In contemporary adventures — both straight and gay — of re-imagining sociality and community, psychoanalysis is notably absent, as a helpful source or reference, from efforts to conceptualize a sociality no longer imprisoned within identitarian ideologies. Not only that: for most queer theorists, psychoanalysis, even if it were to be seen as welcoming such efforts, would necessarily exclude from them what it considers as the “perversion” of homosexual desire. Can a regression, even when it is no longer labeled a neurosis, have a place within a utopic imagination? It will therefore be exceedingly strange to discover, at the very origin of psychoanalysis, the outline of a conceptualizing of queer desire as somehow exempt from the destructive sociality of straight desire.

This is by no means the same thing as saying that gay and lesbian communities, as they are currently constituted, offer persuasive evidence for the speculative argument I will be making. Indeed, they rather confirm the Foucauldian injunction to which I have already appealed: we must *learn* to be gay. Psychoanalysis was not a place Foucault would have turned to in order to find new relational modes, and I myself have recently specified what seem to me the constitutive limitations of psychoanalytic thinking for any such enterprise.⁶ That thought nonetheless remains indispensable not only because it reminds us, as I have argued elsewhere, of the dangers attached to the pastoralizing of any form of sexual relation, but also because it points — hesitatingly, even unwillingly — to a sociality no longer governed by the unavoidable aggressiveness accompanying what Lacan has analyzed as the subject’s impossible and intractable demand for a sexual relation. Already in Freud, however, a certain reflection on the sexual opens the way to a dissolving of the sexual *in* that impossible relation, and in so doing it encourages reconfigurations of the social far more radical than those contemporary queer attempts to present as revolutionary, as seriously threatening to the dominant social order, such reformist, harmless, and familiar “innovations” as gay marriage, public sex, or the corporate charities that have arisen in response to the AIDS epidemic. Nothing we have imagined so far sufficiently betrays the relational orders under which much of humanity continues to be oppressed. While it has certainly

served those orders in its emphasis on normative sexuality, psychoanalysis has from the beginning been subversive of the dogmas thanks to which it became, in a relatively short period of time, a respectable social institution. Specifically, Freud's theoretical flirtation with the idea of homosexuality as conducive to a "special development" of social impulses can, so to speak, itself be speculatively flirted with to the point, as we will now see, of yielding an astonishing yet plausible argument for a truly sociable sexuality.

It is true that the "particularly active share in the general interests of humanity" that presumably characterizes homosexuals is, for Freud, simply a more visible manifestation of the role of homosexuality in *all* social feelings. In heterosexuals (as well, we might presume, as in those homosexuals who "struggle against an indulgence in sexual acts"), homosexual tendencies are sublimated into friendship and *esprit de corps*. Freud succinctly summarizes this view in "Some Neurotic Mechanisms": "In the light of psycho-analysis we are accustomed to regard social feeling as a sublimation of homosexual attitudes towards objects."⁷ Furthermore, diverted from their original aims and no longer capable of "really complete satisfaction," these tendencies, Freud notes in *Group Psychology*, are more likely "to create permanent ties" than if they had remained uninhibited (and subject to the loss of energy consequent upon the satisfaction of a directly sexual desire).⁸ And yet: Freud suggests that the compatibility of homosexual tendencies with social feelings does not depend on the mere availability of sexual energy from a stage of desire that has, in the majority of cases, been left behind. Remember that, according to *Group Psychology*, sociality is especially pronounced even when homosexual impulses have *not* been left behind, remain uninhibited. There must be a specificity to the desire itself that accounts for its socializing aptitude, even when the desire can no longer be recognized in the cohesion and activities of groups.

"Some Neurotic Mechanisms" ends with the apparently casual observation that "in the homosexuals with marked social interests, it would seem that the detachment of social feeling from object-choice has not been fully carried through."⁹ This thunderously obvious fact would have been an unnecessary (and flat) conclusion to the preceding speculations of this essay if it did not resonate — in ways Freud leaves unexamined — with both one of Freud's earlier etiologies of homosexual desire *and* the conceptually troubled distinction put forward in *Group Psychology* between object-choice and identification. As his title indicates, in order to explain "group psychology" — and, more specifically, "the libidinal constitution of groups"¹⁰ — Freud finds it necessary to go back to "the analysis of the ego" with which readers of his earlier papers "On Narcissism: An Introduction" and "Mourning and Melancholia" would be familiar. The study of melancholia in particular, Freud recalls, had revealed "an ego divided, fallen apart into two pieces, one of which rages against the second." Here is Freud's description of the first ego-piece, a description most fully and famously elaborated a few years later in the discussion of the superego

in *The Ego and the Id*: “It [the part of the ego that “rages against the second”] comprises the conscience, a critical agency within the ego, which even in normal times takes up a critical attitude towards the ego, though never so relentlessly and so unjustifiably.”¹¹

As it has frequently been observed in the literature devoted to the Freudian notion of the ego ideal, the latter is at once loved as a source of narcissistic satisfaction (it possesses “the perfections which we have striven to reach for our own ego”)¹² and feared as a source of rageful moral (and frequently moralistic) demands made upon the ego. Most interestingly, the ego ideal allows Freud to make a somewhat tortuous distinction between object-love and identification. In an extraordinary paragraph in which Freud abandons and reinvents his analytical arguments and terms as he goes along, that distinction is at once affirmed and questioned. In attempting “to define the difference between identification and such extreme developments of being in love as may be described as ‘fascination’ or ‘bondage,’” Freud finally settles on a distinction between an object that has been lost with which the ego then identifies and, in the “bondage” of love, a hypercathexis of the retained object at the expense of the ego. But then he brings up yet another difficulty: “Is it quite certain that identification presupposes that object-cathexis has been given up? Can there be no identification while the object is retained?” The question, Freud notes, is a “delicate” one, although he fails to embark upon a discussion of it. Instead, he concludes with another alternative that, happily, “embraces the real essence of the matter, namely, *whether the object is put in the place of the ego or of the ego ideal.*”¹³ It is as if the question of whether the object must be lost or given up before identification can take place — in other words, the question of whether identification and object-cathexis can co-exist — no longer needs to be answered if a “place” in the mind is invented where the loved object can exist without being identified with. The ego ideal comes to the rescue here: it is both an internalized otherness and an alienated interiority, the loved object at an uncrossable distance from the ego within the ego as well as the originally self-sufficient ego of primary narcissism torn away from the ego and assimilated to a foreign body inhabiting an ego it observes and judges.

It is the invention of the ego ideal, of a “differentiating grade in the ego” (as Freud calls it in the title of *Group Psychology*’s final chapter), that has allowed Freud to allude to the possibility of (a non-pathological) object-love as self-love. Identification in the official Freudian scheme is either the most primitive of emotional ties to an object, or, regressively, a substitute for a lost object-tie. It can, Freud maintains in *Group Psychology*, involve recognition of “a common quality shared with some other person” only if that person “is not an object of the sexual instinct.”¹⁴ What is inconceivable in the Freudian scheme is *identification as libidinal recognition*. But this is not quite accurate; it is conceived of within the Freudian scheme, but only as a perversion. And it is of course the perversion of homosexuality. In his study of Leonardo da Vinci, Freud proposes an account of male homosexual desire which he refers to in both “Some Neurotic

Mechanisms” and *Group Psychology*. After a long and intense fixation upon his mother, the budding homosexual does not abandon her at the end of puberty but rather “identifies himself with her; he transforms himself into her, and now looks about for objects which can replace his ego for him, and on which he can bestow such love and care as he has experienced from his mother.”¹⁵ The renunciation of women as love-objects means that “all rivalry with [the father] (or with all men who may take his place) is avoided.” Freud adds that “the retiring in favour of the father...may be ascribed to the castration complex.”¹⁶ This is of course a very familiar psychoanalytic “reduction” of homosexuality, and it is one that most self-respecting queers find both obsolete and offensive. There is, however, as we say today, a gay-friendly way of reading this account, one that in fact turns it against itself. First of all, the relevance of that reference to the castration complex is by no means certain. Freud’s hypothetical homosexual has after all really not abandoned his mother, but neither has he fantasmatically struggled with his father in order to have her. The Oedipal rivalry — which “should” end with the boy giving up his passionate attachment to his mother to avoid castration at the hands of the father — has simply been by-passed by an identification that is neither a loss nor object-love in the usual sense.

Lacan would say that perversion denies castration — but even the Lacanian promotion of castration from an Oedipal fantasy to the meta-genital status of a lost plenitude of being does not prove the necessity of any type of “deniable” castration for a theory of desire. Castration from a retroactively fantasized fullness of being from which our entry into language severed us is perhaps itself the fantasy of a fantasy. This conceptual meta-fantasy may be dictated by a heterosexual inability to think desire other than as lack or loss. It is the final step in a generalizing of privation consequent upon the dependence of male heterosexual desire on a rivalry that one has not exactly overcome but which has more simply and more catastrophically ended in defeat. All heterosexual desire, according to the terms of that very discipline that has argued for the psychic (not to mention moral) superiority of heterosexual desire, cannot help but be to some degree conditioned by the memory, or the fantasy, of that defeat. The heterosexual male’s rageful resentment at the victorious father must, in what are hardly negligible after-effects, find expression not only in the antagonism toward other men that, according to Freud himself, makes heterosexual social feeling less developed than homosexual social feeling, but also in a misogynous aggressiveness toward all those women who, to some degree, cannot help but be seen as mere substitutes for an abandoned, irreplaceable, supreme object of love. It would, then, hardly be surprising if, far from being a secondary manifestation of a fall from Being, Oedipal castration were the source and the motivation for elaborations — satisfying to the psychoanalytic ego — of an ontological cut or castration.

The psychoanalytically defined homosexual, on the other hand, in spite of psychoanalysis’s best — or worst — intentions, is (at least insofar as he is exclusively homosexual, which of course he never is) a stranger to these murderous passions — perhaps, most fundamentally

and beneficently, to passion itself. He wanders in the world — cruises the world, we might almost say — in search of objects that will give him back to himself as a loved and cared for subject. Homosexual desire for others is, in this account, motivated by the wish to treat oneself lovingly. It gives an affirmative answer to the question Freud asks but finds unnecessary to answer in *Group Psychology*: Can there be identification when the object of love is retained? The man Freud describes a few pages before asking this question chooses love-objects *because* he identifies with them. He has, it is true, lost himself when he identifies with his mother, and so he “looks about for objects which can replace his ego for him,” but he will identify with those objects without introjecting them.¹⁷ Contrary to the usual Freudian sequence of a loss compensated for by fantasy-identification with the lost object, in the scenario of homosexual desire the subject has himself managed the loss (presumably by placing his mother in the position of his ego) and, most importantly, the loss is made up for not by another introjection but by *new relations with new love-objects*.

I am not anxious to defend the clinical truth of what might be called the Leonardo-factor in Freud’s account of homosexual desire. Instead, let us consider that account as a myth analogous to (if poetically less satisfying than) Aristophanes’ myth in the *Symposium*. Both stories emphasize what I have called in my discussion of Plato’s dialogue our at-homeness in the world.¹⁸ Every subject re-occurs differently everywhere. “Differently” is crucial: it is the recognizing and longing for sameness that allows us to relate lovingly to difference. A certain homosexualizing of heterosexual love can make this privilege universal. Just as homosexual desire can never be entirely free of “paternal” Law having rendered otherness unknowable, prohibited, and intrinsically hostile, so heterosexual desire must contain — however much it seeks to occlude — the recognition that difference can be loved as the non-threatening supplement of sameness. I would even go so far as to say that the homosexual way into this recognition is a *pis aller*, something like a second-best solution. Without in any way denying the immense range of differences that can be accommodated by homosexual love, we might also acknowledge the even rarer opportunity in heterosexual love for a non-murderous wonder at difference. While, as it has been vehemently argued in recent years, sexual difference has been prejudicially sanctified in our psychoanalytically oriented culture as the ground of all difference, it perhaps does have a unique epistemological function in human growth as an early and crucial model for structuring difference. The ego ideal is the psychoanalytic myth that reifies the traumatic component of sexual difference. It refers to the mental resource that allows the subject permanently to judge others as resistant to an identification based on recognition — and, correlatively, to stigmatize the external world as constitutively alien and hostile to the self. Hatred of the world, as Freud writes in “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” “always remains in an intimate relation with the self-preservative instincts.”¹⁹ The impossible demand upon a world in which I am nowhere to be found, where self-recognition would always be a mistake, is that the world provide exact

replications of myself, that in fact it be erased and replaced by the specular mirage of a universalized selfhood. But since those hated alien objects also elicit desire, since no human subject can survive walled in by a wholly narcissistic love, the subject loves and hates, desires and fears, the same object — a situation duplicated in Freud’s description of the ego’s relation to the ego ideal (or the super-ego). The latter eroticizes interdiction (which is perhaps itself merely the escape route from otherness, the subject’s willed flight from traumatically different objects — a flight transformed into a command from the outside), and interdiction, the Law, becomes a privileged source of the very jouissance it forbids.

The ability to identify with the loved object — that which Freud sees as one of the sources of the “problem” of homosexuality — allows for a very different relation to the world. The subject’s productive illusion of becoming one with a loved parental caregiver is the useful pretext for the subject to go searching for him- or herself in the world. The self-preservative hatred of objects, never entirely eradicated, can at least become secondary to an object-love identical to self-love. A self-love hospitable to difference: misrecognition here is not the fateful error of imaginary specularization, but rather describes the accommodating of difference by sameness and becomes the motive for continuing the search. As in Aristophanes’ myth, we can never find our “original nature,” or, in Freud’s terms, the ego we need to replace. Finally, however, both myths are somewhat diverting misrepresentations of our presence in the world. They divert us — I mean they turn us away from our presence *already there*. Plato and Freud narrativize that presence as a being we once had but have lost or given up. Thus the subject is — touchingly but erroneously — made the agent of its re-occurrences outside itself. If, as I have been proposing here and elsewhere, we are in the world before we are born into it, this is not because we once — historically or mythically — possessed ourselves, but rather because it is impossible to take on a form — a being — to which the world does not have a response, with which it is not already in correspondence.

Cruising is sexual sociability. The danger associated with cruising is not that it reduces relations to promiscuous sex, but rather that the promiscuity may stop. Few things are more difficult than to block our interest in others, to prevent our connection to them from degenerating into a “relationship.” In the model of cruising implicitly proposed by both the Freudian account of homosexual desire and Aristophanes’ fable in the *Symposium*, the search for the self *out there* can only be beneficently fruitless. The boys Leonardo may love as his mother loved him are of course not exactly Leonardo, and Aristophanes notes, in what I take to be a tone of ironic resignation, “the nearest approach to [our exactly identical other half] is best in present circumstances....Love does the best that can be done for the time being.”²⁰ This erotic best is faithful to an ontological truth: the replications of being are always, however minutely, inaccurate replications.

In an imperceptible but momentous shift of psychic registers, however, the object of desire can evoke not the loving mother but, instead, the impenetrable mother, the mother whose terrifying unintelligibility we domesticated by assimilating it into a narrative of paternal interdiction. The object of desire is now an object of fascination; he or she re-activates a world in which the subject is nowhere to be found, one of pure otherness. The world has become, again, what Jean Laplanche calls the enigmatic signifier that sent us, and that appears to be sending us once again, messages we cannot process, or “metabolize.”²¹ The sign and consequence of this resurrection of the enigmatic signifier in an object of desire is sexual passion. In an extraordinary passage of *Swann’s Way*, Proust exactly dates the shift I am speaking of in Swann’s relation to Odette. It occurs when, having failed to appear at a party where Swann had expected her, Odette is metamorphosed from an object of non-insistent sensual interest into an *être de fuite*, a creature whose inaccessibility has become her very essence. Searching for her throughout the night in the restaurants and on the streets of Paris, Swann brushes past the dim forms of other women, “as though among the phantoms of the dead, in the realms of darkness, he had been searching for a lost Eurydice.”²² He has indeed changed realms, or worlds — or, more exactly, it is Odette who has moved into a world that can be “known” only as a place where Swann is not. Thus his love becomes the constantly renewed epistemological defeat of, to adopt Lacan’s term, the desire of/for her desire. Swann’s sexual fascination, bizarrely yet logically, has little to do with Odette’s body. Odette as enigmatic signifier can be “metabolized” not if she lets herself, to use a phrase Proust mocks, be possessed by him, but only if she allows her desire to be inhabited by Swann’s consciousness. Constitutively, this is what she cannot allow, for in the crisis of his nocturnal search for Odette, Swann himself disappears, and Odette has become nothing more — and, more portentously, nothing less — than the place where he may be hidden as unimaginable otherness. And it is in defining erotic desire as epistemological catastrophe that Proust himself becomes a novelist of heterosexual — or, at least, heteroized — love. The note of condescending acceptance towards Proust’s homosexuality that enters into many admiring critical commentaries on *Remembrance of Things Past* is wholly unnecessary. In his somber glamorizing of a desire grounded in the irreducible opposition between an empty subject and objects of desire that might but will not reveal and return the subject to himself, Proust masochistically celebrates difference as the very condition of desire, thus renouncing the privilege his homosexuality might have afforded him of recognizing, and loving, himself in an hospitably familiar otherness.

“[W]hat makes homosexuality ‘disturbing,’” Foucault remarked in a 1981 interview, is “the homosexual mode of life, much more than the sexual act itself.” He spoke of “a homosexual ascesis that would make us work on ourselves and invent — I do not say discover — a manner of being that is still improbable.”²³ Ascesis — a central concept in Foucault’s study of ancient Greek and Roman “practices of the self” in the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality* —

would be perhaps the principal strategy in any attempt “to become gay,” which Foucault understood as radically different from merely “being homosexual.” In another interview, Foucault specified that he was taking asceticism “in a very general sense — in other words, not in the sense of a morality of renunciation but as an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain to a certain mode of being.”²⁴ While appearing to dismiss “the sexual act itself” as irrelevant to the elaboration of a new “mode of life” (as well as to the fear and hostility with which much of straight society responds to gays), Foucault also asked the interesting question: “How can a relational system be reached through sexual practices?”²⁵ Rather than think of sexuality as “the secret of the creative cultural life,” he encouraged us “to create a new cultural life underneath the ground of our sexual choices.”²⁶ “The desexualization of pleasure” (we should perhaps specify: the de-genitalizing of pleasure) Foucault found in gay S&M had, he seemed to think, important cultural or relational implications. S&M would help to undermine more general systems of domination modeled on a sexual ideology in which sexual passivity has been, as Foucault put it, “isomorphic” with social inferiority. S&M, Foucault claimed, has helped to “alleviate [the] problem” of men thinking of themselves as natural masters because and only if they are never on the bottom, always on top.²⁷

In *Homos*, I expressed my skepticism about the viability of S&M — a practice constitutively committed, it seems to me, to the idolatry of power — for such major relational shifts. In cruising I am proposing another sexual model — one in which a deliberate avoidance of relationships might be crucial in initiating, or at least clearing the ground for, a new relationality. Having criticized queer theorists for proposing such things as public sex or the non-monogamous gay couple as examples of the new relational modes Foucault urged us to invent, I certainly do not mean to offer the centuries-old practice of cruising as a more authentic relational invention. Since we are not going to reinvent relationality *ex nihilo*, the point is to see how certain familiar practices — such as S&M, public sex, sexually unstable intimacies — have or do not have the potential for tracing what Foucault also called “new alliances and...unforeseen lines of force.”²⁸ The fact that the practices just referred to are generally condemned outside the circles that engage in them can hardly be said to certify their relational inventiveness. An understandable but unfortunate queer response to this condemnation has been, on the one hand, the untenable suggestion that these practices are something new and, on the other, the claim that, contrary to what most people think, they are perfectly consistent with human decency, integrity, and dignity. This second argument defeats the first; it brings us right back to values embraced (if obviously not invented) by homophobic “morality.” In short, these defensive arguments insufficiently betray the relational modes sanctified by the dominant culture. Does cruising make us feel as worthy as, or perhaps even more worthy than, a comfortably monogamous straight couple — in which case cruising becomes even less interesting than marriage — or does it help us to at least glimpse the possibility of dismissing moral worthiness itself, of constructing human subjects whom such

moral categories would fail to “cover”? In other words, it is not a question of demonstrating that certain outrageous practices are really taking place within the parameters of a traditional ethics, but rather of specifying the ways in which those practices may or may not require us to elaborate new ethical vocabularies.

Cruising, like sociability, can be a training in impersonal intimacy. The particularity that distinguishes it from sociability is, of course, that it brings bodies together. It is as if the game of coquetry described by Simmel moved into a sexual relation — but one to which Simmel’s description of a non-sexual coquetry would still apply. Simmel, we remember, speaks of the coquette not being quite herself. She is, as we all are when we are sociable according to Simmel, somewhat less than herself; the game goes on only if her passions and practical interests stay out of the game. Similarly, in cruising — at least in ideal cruising — we leave our selves behind. The gay bathhouse is especially favorable to ideal cruising because, in addition to the opportunity anonymous sex offers its practitioners of shedding much of the personality that individuates them psychologically, the common bathhouse uniform — a towel — communicates very little (although there are of course ways of wearing a towel...) about our social personality (economic privilege, class status, taste, and so on).

Most important, the intimacy of bodies no longer embellished or impoverished, protected or exposed, by the “clothing” of both dress and character offers an exceptional experience of the infinite distance that separates us from all otherness. Psychological and social difference forecloses this naked (in more than one sense) perception of otherness. Differences traumatize and fascinate us; they inspire our aggressiveness but also our tolerance; they are never *totally non-negotiable*. It seems to me useful to distinguish between these differences and the more than physical distance — the metaphysical distance — that always, and irremediably, separates the subject from otherness. The otherness I refer to is one that cannot be erased or even reduced by the inaccurate replications that, by inviting multiple and diverse self-recognitions, make of the world a hospitable space in which the subject ceaselessly, and always partially, re-occurs. Outside, even where I am again, is, simply by virtue of its being outside, infinitely distant. The intimacy with an unknown body is the revelation of that distance at the very moment we appear to be crossing an uncrossable interval. Otherness, unlocatable within differences that can be known and enumerated, is made concrete in the eroticized touching of a body without attributes. A non-masochistic jouissance (one that owes nothing to the death drive) is the sign of that nameless, identity-free contact — contact with an object I do not know and certainly do not love and which has, unknowingly, agreed to be momentarily the incarnated shock of otherness. In that moment we relate to that which transcends all relations.

For me, this illuminates the connection I have previously made, and which has always remained somewhat mysterious to me, between jouissance and ascesis. The jouissance of otherness has as

its pre-condition the stripping away of the self, a loss of all that gives us pleasure and pain in our negotiable exchanges with the world. In the *jouissance* of otherness, an entire category of exchange is erased: the category of intersubjectivity. This erasure is an ascetic (not a masochistic) practice — a “practice of the self,” to use Foucault’s term, but not in his sense of “an intensification of subjectivity,” nor for the sake of self-domination or the domination of others. In ascetic erotic contact, we lose much that is presumed to be “good” in sex (especially, it is said, the heightened awareness of another person), but the non-attributable intensity I am attempting to evoke also makes impossible that envy of the other’s *different* *jouissance* that nourishes homophobia and misogyny. In “Is the Rectum a Grave?” I speculated on the fantasy, in heterosexual men, of an intolerably alien ecstasy inherent in female sexuality and in gay male sexuality.²⁹ I now think that the hateful envy of that ecstasy is the envy of a certain kind of death. The association of sex with death is familiar; I suggest that this association is made when we feel that we cannot profit from it. More specifically, it is the association of sex not with death but with dying. The envied sexuality is the *lived* *jouissance* of dying, as if we thought we might “consent” to death if we could enter it orgasmically.

The sexual sociability of cruising facilitates the move into what can only be referred to by the oxymoron of metaphysical sociability. The inadequate subjectivity that sociability requires — the self-subtraction — is, by definition, the absence of those psychic, sexual, and social differences in which sex becomes secondary to the anguished dream of plotting our own dying. Our task now might be to see how viable the relationality we have uncovered in activities apparently so removed from — even antagonistic to — each other as sociability and cruising might be for other types of connectedness. Foucault wrote that “[a]fter Descartes, we have a nonascetic subject of knowledge.”³⁰ Might the diffusion of certain ascetic practices threaten the security of that “subject of knowledge” — and in particular the hyperbolic ego’s destructive illusion of power over the objects of knowledge? In attempting to answer these questions, we would of course be elaborating a new ethics. Let us call this an ecological ethics, one in which the subject, having willed its own lessness, can live less invasively in the world. If our psychic center can finally seem less seductive than our innumerable and imperfect reappearances outside, it should then seem not only imperative but natural to treat the outside as we would a home.

1. Reprinted as Georg Simmel, "Sociability," in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine, trans. Everett C. Hughes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 127-129. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text.
2. Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and The Analysis of the Ego*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 18:141.
3. Freud, "Psychoanalytic Notes upon an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)," in *SE* 12:61.
4. Ibid.
5. Freud, "Some Neurotic Mechanisms in Jealousy, Paranoia and Homosexuality," in *SE* 18:232.
6. See Leo Bersani, "Genital Chastity," in *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 351-366; and "Against Monogamy," in *Beyond Redemption: The Work of Leo Bersani*, ed. Timothy Clark and Nicholas Royle, a special issue of *Oxford Literary Review* 20:1-2 (1998): 3-21.
7. Freud, "Some Neurotic Mechanisms," in *SE* 18:232.
8. Freud, *Group Psychology*, in *SE* 18:139.
9. Freud, "Some Neurotic Mechanisms," in *SE* 18:232.
10. Freud, *Group Psychology*, in *SE* 18:115.
11. Ibid., 109.
12. Ibid., 112-113.
13. Ibid., 113-114.
14. Ibid., 108.
15. Ibid.
16. Freud, "Some Neurotic Mechanisms," in *SE* 18:231.
17. Freud, *Group Psychology*, in *SE* 18:108.
18. See Bersani, "Sociality and Sexuality," *Critical Inquiry* 26:1 (2000): 641-656.
19. Freud, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," in *SE* 14:139.
20. Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehemas and Paul Woodruff, in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 476.
21. See Jean Laplanche, "The Drive and Its Object-Source: Its Fate in the Transference," in *Jean Laplanche: Seduction, Translation, and the Drives*, ed. John Fletcher and Martin Stanton, trans. Martin Stanton (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1992), 188.
22. Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way/Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1989), 252.
23. Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," trans. John Johnston, in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Vol. 1: Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 136-137.
24. Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," trans. P. Aranov and D. McGrawth, in *Essential Works*, vol. 1, 282.
25. Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," 137.
26. Foucault, "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity," in *Essential Works*, vol. 1, 164.
27. Foucault, "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act," trans. James O'Higgins, in *Essential Works*, vol. 1, 152.
28. Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," 136.
29. Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 197-222.
30. Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in *Essential Works*, vol. 1, 279.