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Sociological

<Begin quotation>

While Bourdieu's work on the repressively creative function of social naming and the correlative power of defining and legitimating social identities is invaluable, the discipline within which he did this work could, it seems to me, provide only inadequate formulas of resistance. Bourdieu's emphasis on the subject's complicity with the identity imposed on him or her--we recognize as already ours the names imposed on us--is an important aspect of his work. But any analysis of the psychic processing of social naming must include factors alien to a strictly sociological perspective on the mind, which only psychoanalysis can provide.

-- Bersani, Thoughts and Things 24

<End quotation>

In the second chapter of Thoughts and Things, the first half of which is devoted to Jean Genet's novel Our Lady of the Flowers (Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs), Leo Bersani turns for a moment to the work of Pierre Bourdieu before turning away again. The sentences cited above are the moment where he turns away. I would like to quarrel with Bersani's reading of Genet's novel and with his way of imagining what a sociological perspective can be, since Genet's perspective is, in my view, more richly understood as sociological.<1>

"What does it mean to be a man?" is the question with which Bersani opens this chapter of Thoughts and Things, followed by two others: "But first of all, what does it mean to act like a man? And, most important, what is the relation between acting like a man and being a man" (15). Naming and performing (acting) are two of the keywords of Bersani's analysis of Genet: "For Genet, the so-called real is, it would seem, inseparable both from the names we give to it and the gestures by which we stage

it” (15).

Bersani’s reading of Genet turns out to be pursuing something he calls “unnamability,” a state he will claim Genet’s character Divine briefly achieves in relation to sex/gender. “How can we become unnamable?” Bersani wants to know, because “unnamability can operate as a form of resistance to networks of repressive power” (16). In Genet, there are “comical moments when being fails to follow naming” (16). In the case of Divine, such a moment occurs after the titular Our Lady of the Flowers enters the novel, and Divine falls in love with the handsome young murderer. Bersani tracks Divine’s efforts to imagine her way into an active, masculine role that might allow her to have sex (in an active, masculine kind of way) with Our Lady. He sums up: “In desiring Our Lady as a feminized sexual partner, Divine feels ‘virilified,’ but she can’t, through her actions, attain the male identity that would apparently be the necessary support for her desires.” That is, Divine’s performance of the masculinity she requires (so she thinks) in order to have the kind of sex with Our Lady she thinks she wants turns out to be bad acting, an inefficacious performance. “Neither one nor the

other, Divine is reduced to ‘a timid clown in plain dress, a sort of embittered swish,’ but that pathetically muddled figure has, in its very muddlement, become unnamable, free by virtue of its very failure to be recognized, to be identified” (20).

Yet Bersani has left out something else that is going on in this passage and in the novel in general. Genet is clear about one of the sources of Divine’s failure to have the kind of sex she imagines she wants with Our Lady. Our Lady of the Flowers is very concerned with Divine’s age. At a certain point, upon offering a set of scattered vignettes about Divine’s life, the narrator instructs the reader: “Since I wish to show the reader a few candid shots of her, it is up to him to provide the sense of duration, of passing time, and to assume that during this first chapter she will be between twenty and thirty years of age” (99–100). The implication seems to be that if the reader fails to imagine Divine within these age parameters, something will be misunderstood. Later in the novel, we will read: “How are we to explain that Divine is now thirty and more?” (202). Something happens to Divine in the novel because she is around thirty years old. Something happens, the novel says, to her

desire. The novel shows it happen through her encounter with the sixteen-year-old Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs: “Until then, she had loved only men who were stronger and just a little, a tiny bit older, and more muscular than herself. But then came Our Lady of the Flowers, who had the moral and physical character of a flower; she was smitten with him. Something different, a kind of feeling of power, sprang up [. . .] in Divine. She thought she had been virilified” (132–33). This leads to a sex scene in which she imagines she is going to top Our Lady, although it doesn’t turn out that way. (To find this scene you have to read the original French edition, and not the expurgated version that was translated into English.) Our Lady turns out to be a sexual agent whose masculinity remains intact whether he tops or bottoms for other men. In the transitional sexual encounter with Divine, he seems open as to how things might transpire. (“For Our Lady of the Flowers was a nice guy [. . .] which is to say, willing to play along” [Notre-Dame 139, my translation].) Yet the encounter ends with him penetrating Divine. If she had thought her sexuality, her relation to masculinity, might have been shifting, it was a mistaken thought, the novel tells us:

“Divine had not become virile; she had aged. An adolescent now excited her, and that was why she had the feeling of being old, and this certainty unfurled within her like the hangings formed by the wings of bats” (134). Divine’s sex/gender and the nature of her object choice turn out to be age-dependent. This is important and interesting for several reasons, but I will focus on one here. For Bersani, Divine’s muddled sex/gender results in unnamability, and this momentary becoming unnamable constitutes something desirable for Bersani: a “failure to be recognized” (20) that suggests a form of resistance for which he wishes to advocate, a resistance to what seem to me to be rather overly abstract and monolithic evocations of the State and the Law.

Divine is not confronting the state or the law per se in her desire for Our Lady and in the odd performance of masculinity that it momentarily entails. She is confronting her own social and biological aging as those processes interact with the norms of her own sexual culture, norms that she has incorporated into her own sexual habitus. One of the things that is most sociological about Our Lady of the Flowers is the way it brings to legibility cultural norms that might otherwise remain

mostly implicit. In his lectures on the state, Bourdieu describes the role poets and prophets sometimes play in imposing form: “[I]t is in this way that the inexpressible, the ineffable, things that are sometimes unnameable, become nameable; it is the price to be paid in order to bring what could not be named into the realm of the potentially official” (On the State 59). It is something like this that Genet is engaged in in Our Lady of the Flowers, giving expressible form to the implicit norms of a non-mainstream sexual culture.

In her twenties and thirties, Divine mostly had sex with men slightly older and more masculine than her, tops to her bottom. This social form of sexuality suited her for a time but has become troubled as she ages. When she meets the much younger Our Lady, who, true to his moniker, has something of the flower about his character and his build despite being recognizably masculine, Divine confronts some confusion. How would age and sex/gender interact if they ended up in bed together? Surprisingly, Our Lady is nice enough to play along and to let Divine take the lead when they have sex. Genet’s novel is sociologically experimental, we could say, regarding the sexual

forms available to Divine. Could something unexpected work for this or that person? Could it work within the culture? If it works for the person, will it work for the culture? If it works in the culture, will it inevitably work for the person? In this case, as Genet writes the scene, Divine sets out to fuck Our Lady but is so overwhelmed by the presence of his cock that the opposite happens. Even if Our Lady would generously and perhaps atypically have gone either way, both Divine's culture and her own make-up, it seems, have forbidden her something.

In The Rules of Sociological Method, Émile Durkheim postulated that we know we have come up against a social fact when a constraint of uncertain origin is exercised upon us: "A social fact is identifiable through the power of external coercion which it exerts or is capable of exerting upon individuals. The presence of this power is in turn recognizable because of the existence of some pre-determined sanction, or through the resistance that the fact opposes to any individual action that may threaten it" (56-57). It is an experience of this kind that Genet has written for Divine. His novel studies the logic of the sexual practices of a certain social group, and

includes a number of moments when persons (in particular Divine) attempt something that turns out to be forbidden to them--for reasons that are, it would seem, simultaneously personal and social.<2> A novel is, perhaps, a suitably supple instrument for a study of this kind because, as Bourdieu has consistently shown in his work, practices that exhibit regularities do not necessarily need to conform to a fixed structure. Novels like Genet's seem capable of demonstrating the complexity of forces that put pressure on a given circumstance and produce a kind of cultural regularity that is nonetheless not itself preordained: "[T]he fact that there is a regularity to forms of conduct, a structure, a pattern, that they are organized and not random, does not imply that they have for principle the structure that it is possible to deduce from an analysis of these practices" (Bourdieu, Sociologie 988). Genet's novelistic interest seems well attuned with Bourdieu's understanding of practical action: "[W]e could say that in three-quarters of our actions we make use of a knowledge of the social world that remains in a practical state and implies no representation: ordinary agents make use, in their ordinary practices, of knowledge without

representation” (980). All of Genet’s characters act knowingly in a practical way; it is Genet as narrator who provides the narrative structure and the imagery that transform their practices into formal representations.

It was my delight at seeing Bersani turning to Bourdieu in relation to Our Lady of the Flowers, combined with my frustration with how those pages turned out, that made me want to work through this section of Thoughts and Things. Bersani is drawn to two analytical moves for which Bourdieu is well known. The first is his characterization of the symbolic violence through which “the dominated tend to adopt the dominant point of view on themselves” (Bourdieu, Masculine 119). In doing so it is not just their minds that are involved; there is also a “somatization of the social relations of domination” (23), with the result that “it is quite illusory to believe that symbolic violence can be overcome with the weapons of consciousness and will alone” precisely because “the effect and conditions of its efficacy are durably and deeply embedded in the body in the form of dispositions” (39).

The second part of Bourdieu's thinking that Bersani takes up has to do with naming. Bersani here cites from the final paragraph of Bourdieu's Pascalian Meditations: "the State [. . .] brings into existence by naming and distinguishing" (qtd. in Thoughts 20). What the state brings into existence is a point of view, categories, classifications, various kinds of hierarchies and structures. As Bersani notes, "[T]he extraordinary inertia resulting from the inscription of social structures on our bodies accounts for the difficulty of escaping from those structures" (21). Divine serves as Bersani's example of a figure that "has, in its very muddlement, become unnameable, free by virtue of its very failure to be recognized, to be identified" (20). I have already indicated why I would not read the novel in this way. I also don't think Genet's treatment of Divine provides a good counterexample to Bourdieu. Here are two of the sentences that were my point of departure, where Bersani turns away from Bourdieu: "Bourdieu's emphasis on the subject's complicity with the identity imposed on him or her--we recognize as already ours the names imposed on us--is an important aspect of his work. But any analysis of the psychic processing of

social naming must include factors alien to a strictly sociological perspective on the mind, which only psychoanalysis can provide” (24). What follows these sentences is a brilliantly written, intense, concise paragraph of pure Bersanian thought and style, but one where he nonetheless misunderstands Bourdieu.

The first sentence of the paragraph is beautiful, classic, quintessential Bersani: “To recognize as belonging to us that which limits and oppresses us is a phenomenon impoverished by the word used to describe it” (24). He seems to wish to find in Bourdieu a concept of recognition that, in fact, is not there. He continues, “Recognition is the conscious end-term of hidden impulses that complicate it, that make our apparently complicitous recognitions an ambiguous mix of an erotically charged desire to be controlled as well as a nostalgic fantasy of lost authentic being that might energize a resistance to available social terms of understanding.” Cognition and recognition are not necessarily conscious in Bourdieu. I find Bourdieu’s dispositions (both mental and physical, neither purely one nor the other, and revealing themselves in practice rather than through conscious reflection or cognition) a richer

tool to think with than Bersani's highly mental psychoanalytic unconscious, but clearly both thinkers share an appreciation for the complexity of productive acts of resistance. In fact, I don't think anything Bersani has to say about the nature of the psychoanalytic unconscious offers any serious challenge to Bourdieu's thought. For the record, Bersani's paragraph concludes, inimitably:

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These psychic phenomena at once fortify our subjection to an oppressive intelligibility and contain versions of potential being that constitutively resist that given intelligibility. The very recognition of the recognition described by Bourdieu is already an aspect of that resistance, although it is probably also identical, in the logic of the (psychoanalytically rather than sociologically described) unconscious, to that from which it seeks to liberate us. An awareness of these conflicting impulses to resist subjection and to resist resistance--essentially, a taking into account of the unconscious--is indispensable to

the political relevance of social analysis. (24)

<End extract>

Bersani then goes on to wonder “how to resist the naming that confers legitimacy.” He asserts that “the Law that names us, that legitimizes or delegitimizes the identities it names, is not an agency that can be negotiated with, and to reject its authority may necessitate a potentially irreversible negativizing not only of the world but also of the subject him- or herself” (24–25). Here, I think we can diverge from this monolithic construction of “the Law,” which seems to me analytically clumsy or rigid and to miss the fact that we are all agents operating practically in a realm of intersecting and overlapping fields and contexts with many competing official and unofficial agencies of naming exerting pressure on us--obviously a more Bourdieusian way of looking at things, more in line with what happens in Our Lady of the Flowers, and also more in line with what a text like Genet’s novel actually does in the world. For Bourdieu, “[T]here is always room for cognitive struggle over the meaning of the things of the world,” and “[T]he partial

indeterminacy of certain objects authorizes antagonistic interpretations, offering the dominated a possibility of resistance to the effect of symbolic imposition” (Masculine 13–14). This could be one description of what Genet is up to in his novels.

Earlier, I cited a passage from Bourdieu’s seminars on the state where he described the role of poetic/prophetic figures like Genet (in fact, the example in his seminar is Mallarmé) as “bringing what could not be named into the realm of the potentially official.” It is not only the state that names. We all do. All institutions do. Language does. A state is not a consistent and coherent thing; it is a set of sometimes competing institutions that address us and can be addressed differentially. Still, overall, one of the aims of the state as Bourdieu describes it is to have “a monopoly on the official” (On the State 84). The monopoly is, of course, contested right and left. “To a certain extent, in fact, every individual agent stakes a claim to the monopoly of the naming operation that official discourse constitutes” (65). The contestation provided by poets and prophets is especially important to Bourdieu. “Here

we see the role of the prophet, which is to reveal to the group something in which the group deeply recognizes itself.” The prophet moves practical knowledge into the verbal realm.

“Mallarmé developed this theme of the poet who brings something into existence by the words he pronounces. The person making such creative nominations can make things exist that should not exist, that are unnameable. For example, he can have homosexuality recognized in a society that despises it” (59).

This isn't the place to go into the links that run from Mallarmé to Genet, both authors deeply important to Bersani. But Bourdieu is right, and in one sense Bersani has only confirmed it in the way he, too, in his work, invests Genet with prophetic stature of a kind. And maybe Bersani, in naming the unnameable, paradoxically (but in a practical kind of way) ends up being a Bourdieusian in spite of himself.

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<sc>michael lucey</sc>'s two most recent books are What Proust Heard: Novels and the Ethnography of Talk (2022) and Someone:

The Pragmatics of Misfit Sexualities, from Colette to Hervé Guibert (2019), both published by the University of Chicago Press. He is the Sidney and Margaret Ancker Professor of Comparative Literature and French at the University of California, Berkeley.

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<A>Notes

1 I feel a little strange referring to Leo as Bersani, since he is Leo in my mind. Leo gave some lectures at Princeton when I was a graduate student there, including a version of his essay “Against Ulysses.” I remember working up the courage to go to his office hours to query him on whether he thought the argument he was making about Joyce’s novel really worked for the whole novel, however brilliantly it seemed to account for the passages he wrote about. He seemed perfectly happy, in my memory, to accept that it might be the case that it didn’t. Nothing could have prepared me, or, I think, others of my generation, for the shock of reading his contribution to the special issue of

October that Douglas Crimp edited in 1987, <sc>aids</sc>: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism. Upon reading “Is the Rectum a Grave?” it felt like the coordinates of my intellectual universe shifted and new intellectual things became possible and necessary. It was a profoundly enabling example of a certain kind of critical practice. I couldn’t really believe it when I was offered a job at Berkeley as a result of a search Leo chaired. He was a friendly mentor during my junior faculty years, and was chair of the French department when I came up for tenure, which made that ordeal a bit easier to endure. Throughout our years as Berkeley colleagues and after, Leo was a consistently friendly presence in both the real world and in my mental universe, one whose work I found immensely compelling, and yet felt compelled to argue with. I continue that productive (at least for me) relation here, alas now a one-sided one.

2 I discuss a number of sex scenes in the novel (some left out of the translated version) in which this comes up in “Genet’s Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs: Fantasy and Sexual Identity.”

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