

# Conversions: Around Tintoretto

THE ESSAY THAT FOLLOWS has at least two origins. The more longstanding of these has been a desire to write about Tintoretto first whetted when I began visiting Venice seriously some twenty-five years ago, often taking as my guide the essays that Henry James wrote about his Venetian experiences.<sup>1</sup> It was James who first alerted me to Tintoretto, James who initiated my conversion from a devotion to Florentine *disegno* and its dematerializing thrust to the Venetian achievement represented by Tintoretto, an accomplishment that would be simplified if understood only as an example of a certain materialism achieved by way of color. For James, Tintoretto was a kind of test case, someone operating at “the uttermost limit of painting” that touched what he called “inspired poetry” (340). With Tintoretto such divisions as those between form and matter or realism and symbolism cease making sense. But, for James, however this happened, it was not a matter of transcendence. As limit case, Tintoretto was, for James, the painter of a “conscious, reluctant mortality,” and his paintings were apparent “clusters of accidents” that nonetheless offered a depiction of “life” (306)—what James calls as well “a supplementary experience of life” (342). The supremacy of Tintoretto as an artist for James pointed well beyond art.

If this suggests that James imagined Tintoretto as a kind of alter ego, it was not simply in terms of artistic ambition.<sup>2</sup> At any rate, I think my responsiveness to James’s response might well be termed queer, if only because James sought out a border in which qualities otherwise marked by difference (poetry vs. painting, form vs. content, realism vs. symbolism) were not so much dissolved as seen to offer a way of talking about a mode of being in which sameness overcame difference without thereby effacing it. This point, or at least the way in which I have just formulated it, brings me to the more immediate origin of this essay, a project I am pursuing in the relationships between materialities of several kinds and modes of nonnormative sexuality in the early modern period. The placeholder for this conjunction, in this essay, and in the project as a whole, is ventured by way of the materialist philosophy of Lucretius, sometimes, as here, in tandem with some quite other currents of thought, in this case varieties of Christianity that find the body as a site of something well beyond denial. Elsewhere in this project, the late

work of Foucault on *askesis* is called upon to provide a connection between disparate practices of work upon the self where Foucault finally located an origin for the history of sexuality in the desiring subject who practices the care of the self.

That Foucauldian project is not explicitly explored in this essay; closer to its immediate concerns to think sexuality together with materiality is recent work by Leo Bersani. Again, not mentioned in the body of the essay, but subtending it, is Bersani's turn from a psychoanalytic version of the subject, whose desire testifies to a primordial lack, to a version of the subject whose attempts at relationality stem from an original relatedness. "Each subject reoccurs differently everywhere" is one succinct version of a thesis that Bersani offers in the service of a claim that "all love is, in a sense, homoerotic" (656), where the sense invoked by Bersani is the notion of an original sameness which is rediscovered in erotic relations.<sup>3</sup> Those claims seem to me to relate to the Lucretian universe, in which everything arises from a basic material substratum which survives the mortality of particular contingent life forms. In retrospect, I hear in James's account of Tintoretto—the ways in which its accidents summon up a mortal life that exceeds mortality even as it testifies to it—something similar. As the essay proper opens, I begin with a formulation of such connectedness that Bersani and his co-author Ulysse Dutoit find in a Caravaggio painting as a way of undertaking a similar foray into Tintoretto's oeuvre, in which I focus on an early, small canvas of his as pointing to some of the central features of his work. This opening is almost immediately critical, insofar as I find the sexual implications—the homoness of an underlying material sameness—disappointingly abandoned by Bersani and Dutoit's analysis of Caravaggio in favor of an abstracted formal unity; it is towards the restoration of those queer implications that the opening pages of the essay that follows are devoted.



Writing about Caravaggio's *Conversion of St. Paul* in the Cerasi Chapel (Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome), in *Caravaggio's Secrets*, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit discover the saint—supine on his back, knees raised, arms extended—in a "turn toward' a new relatedness, but one without transcendence, a relatedness with the *natural* nonhuman."<sup>4</sup> This is exactly what is displayed in Tintoretto's depiction of the same subject (in an early painting of his in the National Gallery, Washington, D.C.), I would argue, and in the pages that follow I do not seek so much to connect the two paintings (it is doubtful that Caravaggio knew Tintoretto's painting) as to further the analysis offered by Bersani and Dutoit. Although I subscribe to their phrasing about the kind of "new relatedness" on offer, and am therefore prompted to

begin an essay occasioned by Tintoretto's painting with their words, it is nonetheless the case that I would locate this "new relatedness" in contexts other than the ones that they offer. These critical differences can be related to their provocative translation of *conversion* as a "turn toward." What is a conversion? Is it, as the etymology of the word suggests, a turn with? Or is it a turning around? Or back? Does it represent a break? An end? A beginning? In fact, these are questions raised by the conversion of Paul, and have been at the center of Pauline scholarship for the last several years.<sup>5</sup> This scholarship is but one of the contexts that I will adduce in the discussion that follows.

Bersani and Dutoit read this painting by Caravaggio in the course of an exploration of the secrets of his art. Refusing the almost mandatory coupling of secrecy and sexuality that Michel Foucault argued as central to modern regimes of truth in the introductory volume of his history of sexuality, they deny that the provocations of Caravaggio's art can be attributed to the painter's presumptive homosexuality; equally adamantly they refuse to treat the painting as posing a hermeneutic problem. What they offer instead is a beyond sex that is also a before. In the conversion that they offer, any determinate sexuality is merely a parenthesis within an encompassing circulation of a before and beyond sex.<sup>6</sup> The supine "ecstatic passivity" (60) of Caravaggio's Paul, which might call up for readers the emphasis in Bersani's earlier writing on a primary masochism as fundamental to sexuality—a form of sexuality, he insists in "Is the Rectum a Grave?" most flagrantly displayed by the gay man on his back, legs aloft (almost exactly the pose of Caravaggio's recumbent bent-kneed Paul, I would note, although this is not a point that Bersani and Dutoit venture)—is here instead read as "a new receptiveness to the austere sensuality of a universal connectedness of forms" (60). Rather than sex, Bersani and Dutoit venture into a well-established formal analysis. Thus (rather surprisingly, given Bersani's earlier work), we are invited to note the visual congruence between the raised horseshoe and the bit of curved leather between the saint's legs rather than ponder as meaningful the replacement at the site of the genital by an empty loop, a space and form doubled in the poised hoof. However, my point is less to emphasize the wilfulness of the translation (conversion?) of what Bersani might once have called "sexuality" into an "austere sensuality" as to wonder about the connectedness ("a relatedness with the *natural* nonhuman") as well as the version of nature on offer.

Certainly, the refusal of a transcendental meaning to this conversion experience is persuasive; it is even congruent to a degree with more conventional readings of this painting, Walter Friedlaender's, for example (this is not a casual example, of course, given his standing as a Caravaggist, indeed

the one cited most often by Bersani and Dutoit). Friedlaender claimed that the formal composition of the painting produces a kind of reality effect—offering a depiction of what he terms “the common world”; he reserves “spirituality” only for the uncanny light in the picture, which has no obvious source since Caravaggio has dispensed with the visual representation of Jesus that can be found in other depictions of the scene, his own earlier venture included. Tintoretto offers such a representation, as does Michelangelo in his roughly contemporaneous late fresco in the Cappella Paolina (Vatican).<sup>7</sup> But whereas Friedlaender takes Caravaggio’s naturalism to be in the service of “a truly human experience” (27), Bersani and Dutoit insist instead on that “relatedness with the *natural* nonhuman” already noted. As they phrase this elsewhere, Caravaggio is intent on “the incompatibility of existence and being” (88), where “existence” means “human existence” and “being” is another word for “nature.” (The distinction is Heideggerian.) This latter translation of “nature” into “being” draws the analytical terms in the very transcendental direction that the refusal of any spiritual import to the depiction had denied.<sup>8</sup> And, indeed, by the end of their study, the connect-edness on hand is said to be a mode of rejoining “metaphysical being” (83). This beyond and before the human and the sexual is allied in their analysis to the Lacanian Thing, or so Graham Hammill suggests; his reading of Caravaggio takes off from Bersani and Dutoit, but also restores a form of sexuality to his art, albeit also a radically anti-identitarian one; the Thing is that unknowable and yet absolutely determinate situation that subtends each human existence.<sup>9</sup> How easily embodied difference can be translated into a transcendental vocabulary is suggested when Slavoj Žižek conjures up “the sacred place of the Thing” in the course of an inquiry into what of the Christian tradition is worth saving.<sup>10</sup>

Now, it is certainly the case that in Caravaggio’s painting Paul is not related humanly to the other figures in the painting—the horse, the older man attending to it; his link to those figures is, as Bersani and Dutoit claim, a matter of form (and also of color). That the horse’s raised hoof is unthreatening, even as Paul seems to have been thrust down and forward to the edge of the canvas—and yet not by the only force in the painting that could have effected this—certainly suggests that his (non)relationship to the animal figures something of the nonhuman relatedness to whatever that force might be. Indeed, the passivity of Paul is perhaps matched by the docility of the horse (as Friedlaender insisted, it is an ordinary working animal, not a stallion), who hardly seems to need to be restrained by the man adjusting his bridle. Further, as Bersani and Dutoit emphasize, the jungle of arms and legs that fills the space between the horse’s body and the prostrate saint, appendages which do not touch each other and which are all rather confusingly related

to upper body parts (in the case of Paul, one further wonders about the location of the lower part of his right leg), is in line with an analysis that has suspended thought as decipherment—hermeneutic analysis—as what the painting requires. Rather, their claim here and throughout *Caravaggio's Secrets* is about submission to something that seems incapable of formulation. What cannot be named is nonetheless called up in a variety of terms; “metaphysical being,” the ultimate clincher, unites Heidegger to the Lacanian Thing. The thing not to be named and yet so designated in this beyond/before of “being” tips the analysis of the natural in the direction of the supernatural. (I phrase the condition of unnamability in this way to recall the well-known formulation about sodomy as the crime not to be named among Christians, and thereby mean to suggest that Bersani and Dutoit have perhaps not entirely sidestepped the question of sexuality so much as they have displaced/converted it.) By way of this submission to the inhuman, the threat of the “unnamable finality of inorganic matter” (5) is mastered—a submission, I would say, to a transcendental, if not humanly comprehensible, force. This passive mastery is the task of aesthetics (this explains why their analysis ultimately is formal) as is made explicit in Bersani and Dutoit’s book on Derek Jarman’s 1986 film *Caravaggio*, when they write of “the disclosure of Being which perhaps only art brings about.”<sup>11</sup>

Just as their book on Caravaggio refuses a homosexual key to the secrets of his art, here too Jarman’s assertions of the relation of his film to a militant homosexual politics is dispelled for an analysis that finds it remarkable that “non-desiring connectedness is shown even in homosexual love” (71). This is, for them, the seemingly counterintuitive truth of Jarman’s encounter with the “plenitude of Being” (81).

It is from these transcendental and desexualizing gestures that I would seek to save their analysis. For I would note that strictly theological accounts of the conversion of St. Paul have a term that would cover what Bersani and Dutoit describe; the term would be “grace.” This is the point about Paul’s conversion emphasized in the *Legenda Aurea*, a compendium of lives of the saints that served as useful repository of information and interpretation from its initial mid-thirteenth-century publication on: its account of Paul is heavily indebted to St. Augustine.<sup>12</sup> That the incomprehensible doings of a deity who turns a persecutor of believers in Jesus into the founder of his church might have a shattering effect on the subject is part of the argument that Leo Steinberg offers in his analysis of Michelangelo’s painting of the subject, where precisely this experience is offered as one that must surpass merely human doing and be the gift of “unmerited grace.”<sup>13</sup> This claim is sufficiently congruent with the approach of Bersani and Dutoit, and equally to be resisted if the inhuman is simply to be another way of saying the divine.

Rather, the route to follow has been suggested by Hammill, who, acknowledging the erotic thrust of Caravaggio's St. Paul, remarks stunningly that it "resuscitates the flesh that Paul relinquishes" (66). Hammill supports his analysis by pointing to St. Augustine's considerations of the significance of creation and of historical time. This is clearly a quite different reading of Augustine than that offered in the *Legenda Aurea*, and I will return to it below.<sup>14</sup> Beside these theological contexts, there is another context that I would venture as relevant here as well, epicurean materialism. This philosophical tradition, I argue, provides terms for the natural (but not human) matrix that Bersani and Dutoit claim for Caravaggio, and in a fully serious philosophical manner that has no need of any metaphysical notion of Being to explain the nature of matter.

Bersani and Dutoit claim that Caravaggio's paintings give access to a oneness of being that is natural. This connectedness would join the human and the nonhuman in what they describe at one point as the "depersonalized resourcefulness of the real" (33); this "real" includes human mortality even as it refuses that limit. Caravaggio's strangely alive-dead Lazarus, or the crucified Jesus in his deposition, or Mary on her bier, all similarly infused with a life that pervades their corpses, suggests a life-beyond-mortality that is nonetheless housed in flesh, "an unmappable extensibility of being" (39) beyond mortal limit. Extension, pulsating energy even in "dead" flesh: for Bersani and Dutoit, the only way to describe these beyond/before states is to call up a notion of "Being" that cannot be explained further. Yet, the fully materialist vocabulary of epicurean philosophy does this without having to resort to any figuration of the unspeakable. In *De rerum natura*, for example, Lucretius makes a similarly unverifiable claim, that underlying all the forms of life that we can see, and extending beyond life in human terms, there is a form of life that is invisible but nonetheless material—it is housed in the atom, a generative, ever-moving minimal and irreducible principle of life which nonetheless cannot be said to be alive (since it is not mortal, and since its life is precisely seen only in its chance motions, its connections and disconnections, which bring in and out of existence forms of life in which the atoms are never extinguished).<sup>15</sup>

One reason for conjuring up Lucretius here is that he provides one of several intellectual contexts that make historically plausible aspects of the art of Caravaggio that Bersani and Dutoit seem to produce entirely theoretically. Bersani and Dutoit are not historicists, of course, and it is not my point that they need to be; nor am I endorsing some claim about historical purity in opposition to theory. Rather, I believe that their intervention becomes more forceful and more precise by contextualizations that can further the philosophical purchase of their analysis. Moreover, in their reading of Jarman's

film about Caravaggio, Bersani and Dutoit concede something that they refuse to Caravaggio's art (unnecessarily, I believe), that a relatedness to "being" can be seen best in and as a form of homo-relation. I would connect this also to Lucretius, to his notion that at the most elementary level everyone and everything is made up of the same stuff ("element" is in fact one of his terms for the atom—the Greek word is not found in *De rerum natura*). This sameness does not preclude difference. Indeed, the Lucretian system, being entirely a matter of chance, is better situated to explain difference than it is to understand how certain forms of being replicate themselves (not that any two examples of any kind are in fact identical to each other—this is the Lucretian counterpart to the Lacanian Thing). Writing of Jarman's film, Bersani and Dutoit insist that it allows one to see that "*we are already out there*" (72), and thereby promotes the discovery of an "*other sameness*" (80). Part of the thrust of this sense of a connection that exceeds personal identity is ethical. The kind of passive acceptance and ecstatic tameness of the scene of the conversion of St. Paul might relate it to the end of epicurean philosophy as a way of life: the unperturbedness to which these practices tend, and precisely through the cosmic realization that death is not to be feared because it really is the end—there is no afterlife to worry this one. The continuity of matter, while neither personally consolatory nor threatening, is nonetheless a warrant of the value of material existence, an assurance that the "meaning" of life lies precisely in this persistence of atomic existence which, at least for Lucretius, is eternal and infinite. It is not Being that goes on but matter. And at every level of connection there is also a disconnection between the aleatory forms of existence that we know and the life that continues in and through and beyond these. The matter which we are does not allow us to know or understand the matter from which we are made in the ways in which we normally understand the material world, among other reasons because the atoms have almost none of the sensible qualities by which we ordinarily apprehend matter.

As I noted, the intervention I wish to make here is not simply theoretical, locating in Lucretius terms that might support the kind of materiality that Bersani and Dutoit describe. A Lucretian analysis of Renaissance painting is also possible historically. So Stephen J. Campbell has argued persuasively in a recent essay on the notoriously mysterious Giorgione *Tempest* that now hangs in the Accademia in Venice.<sup>16</sup> There are aspects of Campbell's analysis that I will want to question; his account, moreover, does not extend a Lucretian case to the 1540s, when Tintoretto probably painted his *Conversion of St. Paul*, and certainly not to early seventeenth-century Rome. I take Campbell to have laid the historical ground for an inquiry that extends well beyond his own rather circumspect historicism which limits its case to

Venetian humanistic contexts of the opening decade or so of the sixteenth century, the same time as Giorgione's painting (usually dated c.1510). Campbell attaches the painting to the particulars of Venetian intellectual culture, and likewise would attach each motif and figure in the painting to a prompt in Lucretius—or in contemporary misunderstandings of the epicurean tradition corrected by way of Lucretian truth. Giorgione's painting is provocatively described as a "rendering of the natural world in an instantaneous moment of shifting appearances" (305). That is, both the painting itself as well as its analysis offers an entirely aleatory conjunction that does not signify in any way beyond itself. Everything refers back to Lucretius, but to a Lucretius who not only espouses detachment but whose text is decomposed back into detached atomic units: "All of the crucial elements of Giorgione's painting . . . can be accounted for through Lucretius' poem" (316), Campbell claims, and I would underscore elements, a reduction to atomic particles that matches the historical method of particularization. These elements don't add up. This method is uncannily like Lucretius, insofar as atoms are material and yet fairly incomprehensible units that have no necessary relationship to anything we might call human meaning (even as they subtend anything called human and everything that humans do); however, it is utterly opposed to Lucretius, since it is not a materialist analysis.

Rather, what we have are morcellated "ideas" in a familiar history-of-ideas approach. Campbell removes the young man from any possible relationship in the painting and detaches him as well from the historical/social context which is said to determine his depiction (actually just the trousers that mark him as a libertine). He is elevated to be an exemplary philosopher, Venus is turned into the Madonna, and their "serene detachment" (317) from nature is virtually a removal from the very nature in which these figures are located. This analysis may well be true to a certain strain of the Renaissance Lucretius, one that worked hard to reconcile materialism to Christian belief, usually by insisting on the divine creation Lucretius denies. This fusion was accomplished in the work of Pierre Gassendi in the seventeenth century, and Campbell finds it anticipated in the circle in which he locates Giorgione, especially through the figure of Paolo Giustiniani: "Remarkably . . . even in holy orders the saintly Giustiniani would profess himself to be a follower of Epicurus. *Voluptas*, he wrote, was indeed the highest good, but it was to be achieved by the contemplation of God in everyday life" (328).

It is perhaps a nice accident that a saintly Paolo is allowed the last word in Campbell's Lucretian analysis; at any rate, a transcendental conversion has been accomplished.<sup>17</sup> Where Lucretius had atoms, this analysis puts God. Nonetheless Campbell's essay does remind its readers of a Lucretian tradition that commenced not long after Poggio Bracciolini discovered a manuscript

of *De rerum natura* in 1417. By the 1430s, Lorenzo Valla was, in a quite resolute manner, espousing *voluptas*, and as Eugenio Garin often pointed out, Valla's argument had its counterparts in other early humanist texts that elevated *voluptas* as a key moral value, and allied pleasure to the vital motion of the cosmos.<sup>18</sup> This spiritualization certainly could take transcendental forms, but not necessarily so.<sup>19</sup> As Campbell briefly outlines, Lucretius gets attached to various attempts to describe the physical workings of the universe.<sup>20</sup> Most significant, however, is the fact that Lucretius was repeatedly published, editions appearing as early as 1495. The edition of Giambattista Pio that first appeared in 1511 begins a tradition in which Lucretian philosophy is not held accountable to Christian truth (it has even been suggested that Pio's commentary influenced Newton).<sup>21</sup> Campbell ventures that Lucretius was especially attractive to Venetian humanists opposing papal encroachments in the opening decades of the sixteenth century, but he believes that the 1516 Synod of Florence condemning Lucretius for arguing for the mortality of the soul sounded the death knell for any further Lucretian investments. In fact, editions continued to appear through the sixteenth century, notably through the Lambino edition that first appeared in 1563, and was reprinted in 1565, 1570, and 1583.<sup>22</sup> Of course, this is not the end of the publishing history; vernacular translations of *De rerum natura* first appear in the seventeenth century. And within the same time frame, the life of Epicurus, including crucial texts by him, the three letters that are the only complete works extant, was available in editions of Diogenes Laertius.

Is Giorgione's painting Lucretian? Perhaps, insofar as it is infused by the atmospheric effects of the storm that looms in the background and casts its light on the scene; perhaps in the way in which the nursing mother seems to be doubled by the leaves that cover her body—if we take that overlapping to suggest a continuity between plant and human existence congruent with Lucretian atomism as an underlying principle joining animate and inanimate forms of life (a counterpart can be seen in Botticelli's *Primavera* [Uffizi, Florence], where metamorphosis is similarly suggested, and a Lucretian subtext in fact has been adduced as one of the sources for that painting by Charles Dempsey). Moreover, the strange relationship between the human figures in Giorgione's painting (the man, woman and child, who seem as if they might be a family group, yet are separated by a river) seems like an illustration of the nonrelational relatedness espoused by Bersani and Dutoit as a homo-ness that joins sameness and difference. Contra Campbell, I would note, however, that the male figure clearly gazes at the woman just as she solicits the viewer's gaze; some circuit of engagement, even as its form and nature remains in question, is demanded by the painting, which is surely one reason why it has puzzled so many who have tried to grasp its mystery.

This mystery, I would add, has a sexual aspect, conveyed both by the veiling of the woman's shoulders (which draws attention to her nudity) and, of course, by the imponderable relationship between her, the male figure and the child that might be theirs, or might not be. It is possible that the elusive missing principle that would connect the various parts of this painting meaningfully lies in the sheer materiality of aleatory conjunction. Certainly here, as in other paintings by Giorgione, an uncanny tonal unity of disparate elements is on display; perhaps that tonality, insofar as it is related to the way in which paint is applied precisely to suggest atmospheric connection that blurs the outlines of separate forms, could intimate an epicurean principle of atomic unity.<sup>23</sup> One is reminded, moreover, of the repeated scenes of grinding of paint in Jarman's *Caravaggio*, which Bersani and Dutoit emphasize as significantly indicating a basic material level of (dis)connection, the pulverization of identity for the sake of what they call "being," materialized in paint.

I wish now to turn from Bersani and Dutoit's theoretical intervention and Campbell's historicizing to the painting that has prompted this discussion—Tintoretto's *Conversion of St. Paul*. A glance at the painting should make clear why I stress these Lucretian questions of materiality. Tintoretto's painting draws the viewer's attention through its dynamic display of bodies in motion, all under the sway of a force that is at once disintegrative and reintegrative. However much the young Tintoretto is indebted to previous painters for some of the configurations of horse and men that fill his canvas—Leonardo, Titian, Pordenone, Raphael and Schiavone are regularly mentioned—as Guillaume Cassegrain argues, in the only full-scale interpretation of the painting of which I am aware, Tintoretto invokes, but refuses, the two main forms in which this subject had been depicted previously: he offers neither the narrative event in which Paul is violently thrown from his horse in direct response to a divine apparition (seen, for example, in Michelangelo's version); nor do we have the kind of detached and visionary Paul that arguably subtends Caravaggio's depiction, if only because Caravaggio's Paul—on the edge of the painting—is in relationship to something not visibly in it, whereas Tintoretto's Paul, while presumably in the grip of a divine vision, is separated from it by a host of figures who ensure that the human/divine relationship is not the sole focus of the painting. It is indeed more the case that all the figures, not just Paul, are in the grip of an experience, or objects of a revelation as much the viewer's as their own.<sup>24</sup> Tintoretto represents the divine, but entirely schematically by a tiny head atop an abbreviated upper torso in the sky. There is no direct contact between this form and Paul (they do not appear to be looking at each other, no ray of light streams from heaven to earth, as can be found in other depictions of the scene, for example in

a version by Benozzo Gozzoli [Metropolitan Museum, New York] where a beam of light goes straight from one to the other). There is not the opening in space as in Michelangelo's painting that suggests the violent intrusion of one kind of reality upon another, the kind of clearing that in paintings of this subject often signal its intense subject (an intensity caught in the sexualized ecstasy of Caravaggio's figure).

In Michelangelo's version, for instance, the witnesses to the event almost appear to explode out from the space cleared by the radically foreshortened, muscular Jesus descending on the supine figure of the saint. Tintoretto will certainly come to adopt this model and make it his own, intensely physicalizing the divine in this manner, and the heavily muscled, often all but unclad figures of angels, saints, and Christ in other works are one way in which Tintoretto's materialization of the divine can be undeniably sexualized. Here, almost the reverse is the case; materiality is rather intensified not through the figures of Jesus or of Paul, but through the kind of equalization that refuses to focus on two individualized figures, and rather disperses its energies in a more atomic and atomizing fashion. It is as if what Arnold Hauser claimed to be true of Tintoretto's final works, in which even depictions of God seem to have him subjected to a cosmic effect that renders everything subservient to its force, has been achieved (or at least anticipated) in this early painting.<sup>25</sup> Tintoretto's Paul does not seem in a unique relationship to the divine, not flattened in some extraordinary relationship to it. The painting is full of an astonishing number of bodies and, more to the point, body parts—of humans and horses—in every pose and position. They could remind us of the thicket of legs in Caravaggio's painting. But whereas there the massive figures of the horse and the strikingly foreshortened figure of Paul demand attention, Tintoretto clearly draws the viewer to this dense and dark middle ground between Paul and Christ where immense interpretive labor is required merely to decipher the activity, to tally up human and animal figures who whirl about each other, often barely visible, many scarcely more than body parts, detached, rotated, some little more than brushed in. What, the painting insists we ask, is this material doing?

It is, I would venture to say, indicating a turbulent force of the kind that Lucretius imagines, out of which a world appears that no longer is vectored up and down, one that cannot be distinguished in terms of the heavenly and earthly materials of Aristotelian scientific philosophy. The painting, it helps to recall, was painted just at the time that Copernicus was publishing his revolutionary text; it anticipates what someone like Giordano Bruno would make of it. Perhaps it even relates to what Alain Badiou means when he calls Paul an antiphilosopher in *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. For him, the term means someone who rejects the ordered Greek cosmos in

order to embrace “the infinite and the untotalizable event” (71).

Such decenterings of an infinite universe even affect how the painting appears to an art historian. For Cassegrain, the tumultuous scenes of tumbling and drowning displace the usual depiction of Paul thrown to the ground. The action, in terms of Paul himself, is suspended, Cassegrain argues (66), displaced elsewhere. Cassegrain attempts nonetheless to make the painting conventional, arguing that its violent scenes serve as admonitions to a viewer; they show, he claims, how numerous are the false paths to God (Cassegrain likens the toppling figures to depictions of heretics tumbling down a ladder on which they have tried to assault the almighty). For Cassegrain, the immense physicality and the enormous energy of the bodies that fill the painting serve only a negative function, repeated humiliations of bodies that might suppose they could themselves find a way to God. (This interpretive move has its parallel in the Christianized and idealized Lucretius in Campbell’s account.) For him, the painting underscores the distance between the divine and the human, and Paul’s conversion is the otherwise unimaginable act of divine grace. Its physicality, bodies thrown to the ground, or into the water, is tantamount to a kind of last judgment, an invitation to the viewer to have the Pauline experience of transcendence of the flesh. What Cassegrain offers, as he says in closing his essay, is a moral reading of the painting; by “moral,” he means what medieval interpreters would by the term “*moraliter*,” and he delivers a tropological reading that points to the eschaton as the only possible horizon of meaning. It puts earthly experience in its place.

In opposition to such dualistic readings, it might be useful at this point to have in mind Badiou’s reading of Paul and Pauline conversion. Badiou barely considers theological matters in their own terms (by avoiding such considerations he is not obliged to pursue the history of the church founded by Paul, a history that belies the universalism that Badiou argues). Nonetheless, his treatment of the categories of spirit and flesh, and the kind of life that Paul imagines, seem relevant for the analysis of Tintoretto. Insisting that the antiphilosophical Paul must be decoupled from such platonic terms as soul and body, and separating spirit and flesh from the platonic pair, he posits that “the death about which Paul tells us, which is ours as much as Christ’s, has nothing biological about it, no more so for that matter than life. Death and life are thoughts” (68), the thoughts termed “flesh” and “spirit” by Paul. That is, “flesh” means a mode of subjection to the law and death; flesh is inaction, compulsion, slavery, repetition. Flesh, thus, is a mode of constraint, tying the body to ritualized behavior, whether imposed by institutions or driven by unconscious compulsion. The freedom of the flesh is a negation, to be sure, but for the sake of an affirmation that breaks with negativity in

the way that the new dispensation parts company with the old. Badiou also calls this grace, affirmation without negation, removed from any dualistic pairing or dialectical relationship, and cites 2 Cor.1.19, “in him it is always Yes,” linking Paul to an all but Nietzschean affirmation of life. It could as easily be a Lucretian affirmation, for in epicurean philosophy, forms of life, combinations of matter, dissipate, but life itself, the materials from which it is made, never does. Such life is emphatically material, and, in Paul, life is a way of being in the body that he calls “spirit.” It is a way of being in the body that is one’s own precisely by being the body of Christ, Badiou claims, citing Gal. 2.20, Paul’s affirmation that for him, for any believer, it is not I, but Christ who lives in me. Christ names the universal subject and the freedom of the new dispensation. “Paul says to us: it is always possible for a nonconformist thought to think. . . . This is what a subject is. It is he who maintains the universal, not conformity” (110–11).

Badiou’s “universal,” insofar as it is nonidentitarian and nonbiological, might be a form of life to be brought into proximity to the new relatedness of the human to a nonhuman materiality that Bersani and Dutoit claim for Caravaggio. Its equivalent in Tintoretto’s case can be seen in the way that he has positioned his Paul in relationship to the bodies in motion between Paul and the godhead. Although Paul is lying on his back, he is not exactly clearly on the earth: some other version of space, one that does not subscribe to the dichotomy of earth vs. spirit, and that would posit rather a continuity of matter across all forms of life, therefore seems to be involved. That the painting is not affirming the divine as some ultimate point of transcendental explanation seems especially clear given that its least visually compelling aspect is its rendition of Jesus, who seems like a figure drawn from some much earlier mode of painting, or from a tradition of manuscript illumination scarcely apt for Tintoretto’s canvas.<sup>26</sup>

The warrant for Cassegrain’s reading, which insists that we see beyond the most visually engaging aspects of the painting, lies in a textual tradition of understanding Paul’s conversion—or Pauline admonitions about spirit and flesh, to which it is attached—as strictly dualistic accounts in which conversion is taken to be an absolute break, a turn from one thing to another. Although Cassegrain claims that such a reading attends to the “figures” in Tintoretto’s painting, by the term “figure” he seems rather to mean a certain dematerializing understanding of allegory. More to the point would be Giorgio Agamben’s argument about “figura,” his claim that Pauline theology is deeply rooted in the double nature of typological figuration, in which any figure is at once historically real and yet anticipatory of a messianic futurity.<sup>27</sup>

Agamben fixes on “the time that remains,” the interval between resurrection and second coming as a double and non-self-coincident form of

temporality made available in this time. He pointedly contrasts this doubleness to dualistic pairings like spirit and flesh. His reading of Paul is alert to various forms of non-self-sameness as the Pauline legacy, and contrasts with Badiou, who treats Paul's declaration of faith in the resurrection of Jesus as a founding moment, an Event that marks a rupture with everything that has come before. Even though it occurs in a situation that has prepared for it, no law can contain or explain it, nor can any philosophical procedure. Although his arguments do not arise from the same concerns as Cassegrain's reading of Tintoretto, Badiou reads the Event as a New Beginning, Paul's conversion as a total break thanks to the "absolutely aleatory intervention on the road to Damascus" (17). Badiou takes this new beginning, empties the Event of its religious and transcendental status (the resurrection is treated as a fable, not a fact) to reveal its formal contours; nonetheless the reading he offers sounds theological: the Event is as unprecedented as is divine grace; universalism comes as a mandate.<sup>28</sup> Unlike Badiou, Agamben does not read Paul's intervention as a radical break, but treats it as an illuminating opening. He disputes Badiou's universal sameness for the sake of expansive possibilities of labile identification through non-self-sameness rather than by way of a universalization that must depend upon exclusion or the refusal of significance to difference. Agamben's non-self-sameness is, in fact, more universal than Badiou insofar as it uncovers the same analytic problem of non-self-identity as nonexclusive, nonidentical and shared differentially.<sup>29</sup>

Agamben's sense of sameness and difference can be put beside the Pauline distinction between body and flesh, especially as developed by Augustine, who stresses the value of the body as divine creation and distinguishes it from the flesh as a misuse of the body. The fact that Augustine also stands behind the theological tradition that underlies a dualistic reading like the one that Cassegrain offers of Tintoretto's painting suggests how fraught these ideas of bodily life are in the Christian tradition. Both possibilities can be seen if we turn to Augustine's account of the conversion of St. Paul.

At least ten sermons on the subject survive; Sermon 279, "On the Apostle Paul," brings together much of what Augustine has to say. These are intensely witty performances, turning on sets of oppositions about a conversion experience that is one of "striking and healing, . . . slaying and bringing to life."<sup>30</sup> The ravenous wolf has become the prey, Augustine writes, "the preacher is being fashioned out of the persecutor" (60); the enemy has become the loyal soldier. Blinded, he sees. These changes from one state to its opposite Augustine sees replicated in the change of name; the man once called Saul—named after a tyrant, "the persecutor of God's holy servant David" (62)—is renamed Paul. "Paul, because little. Paul is the name of humility" (62); the last and the least of the apostles, as Paul himself says of

himself, becomes the first founder of Christianity. The humility of Paul, which Steinberg for example attaches to Michelangelo's rendition of the saint as a river god, as much of his body as possible stretched on the ground, only his head raised, reminds us that humility comes from "humus," earth, as Steinberg emphasizes (26). Paul's name, from Latin *paulus*, is itself a kind of minimal unit; Paul means a minim. Indeed, the name is not a proper name at all but a family name, a clan designation, as Agamben emphasizes as well.

The turns in Augustine's schemas, from one state to its opposite, look like absolute breaks, strict dualisms. Nonetheless the very figuration of conversion, opposites becoming each other, are rhetorical turns that turn in ways that destabilize Augustine's logic. They turn by way of the revaluation of terms that Augustine takes to be the meaning of the incarnation and resurrection. This is a process quite other than the replacement of one thing by its opposite, "the maker made, the creator created" (64) who, in dying and rising "took to himself what you knew" (death, mortality); "showed you what you didn't know" (immortality). And the point of that revelation, and thereby the point of Paul's conversion: "Endure what he took to himself, hope for what he showed you" (64). The conversion is less a decisive change from one state to another, a crossing of opposites like life and death, than it is a revaluation. Once the conversion is accomplished, opposites become opposite. The least is most; the lamb is strongest; the persecuted triumphs over persecutor. In which case, the opposites do not simply change places with each other, they are transformed into each other: "He was laid low by the heavenly voice; in order to have light, he lost the light" (66). When opposites become each other opposition ceases to be opposition. This is not to say that the light that is lost is the same as the light that is had; nor is it to say that lost and had are simply the difference between literal and figurative, flesh and spirit either. After all, the experience of conversion is not a transportation of Paul to heaven but a change in being that is still a matter of being here in the flesh. That is, the conversion that functions to slaughter flesh also is delivered in the flesh and to the flesh.

What is the call that Paul receives? "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" (Acts 9.4) (In his interpretation of Tintoretto's painting, Roland Krischel imagines that a thundering voice is being heard, hence the figure on horseback on the left side of the painting, covering his ears, and the broken drum beneath him[11].) Who is this "me" if not those who believe, those whose identity is as much in them as outside of them? "The head in heaven was crying out for his members still located on earth" (60). This is how Augustine puts it in an extraordinary sentence which relocates the opposites: "Membris adhuc in terra positus caput in caelo clamabat." It is crucial that God became human, crucial because it suggests that the divine is with-

in the human, that head and members form one body. The conversion revalues the flesh but it does not renounce it. The head calls out for the body; it requires embodiment. This is what Tintoretto's painting conveys. As Hammill suggests, in the Augustinian account, the body is something incorporated into Christian revelation, not something simply renounced. The entire figural tradition, as Agamben urges, depends on bringing together historical, material, literal existence with revelation. Paul's sentence cited by Badiou is worth reiterating in this context: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God" (Gal. 1.20). Crucified, yet alive, in the flesh, here and now. Paul's preaching of the resurrection is the reclamation of the body.

In this light, if we return to Tintoretto's painting, it is crucial to note that Paul is not a singular figure. As Cassegrain suggests, the painting is filled with virtual Pauls, with figures, that is, who might be Paul in some other painting and who, in this painting, echo its Paul or tell other parts of his story. His conversion, in other words, is not his alone. Take, for example, the young soldier on horseback on the left side of the painting, holding his head, and not the reins of his bolting steed, who seems to be about to fall from his horse. He could be a version of Paul—depictions sometimes offer the saint as a young Roman soldier (Caravaggio does this, so does Raphael), and the falling Paul is a regular feature in paintings that seek to catch the narrative at the very moment when Paul hears the voice. Although the "real" Paul in the painting is the older man on his back (as he is in Michelangelo), this youthful figure serves to give us at once both Saul and Paul. Moreover, the figure on horseback on the extreme right, the one heading in the direction towards which the Christ figure looks and points, also could be Paul, either when he receives the message telling him to go to Damascus not to prosecute but to begin the work of founding a church, or when Paul is called to Rome, to be martyred (the triumphal figure on the right might recall either moment—or both of them at once—in the history of the church militant). If these Pauls occupy moments in the narrative rendered simultaneous in the painting, they do not exhaust the possibilities, for there are Pauls everywhere in the painting, tumbling down the staircase that provides the diagonal line from the divine torso in the upper left, through/beside Paul and on to the pool at the lower right. Numerous Pauls, numerous horses. The time of the conversion is multiple; the space is as well; there is no way to reconcile the figures in the painting to the singular space/time continuum that was the achievement of one-point perspective or Albertian *historia*. Nor are the rules of gravity exactly observed. Paul levitates. There is even a horse turned completely upside down, as well as at least one human figure in a

similar free fall, his arms extended like Paul's, cruciform. The painting turns on its turns. Conversion in every direction. It is possible even to imagine that it is all a vision being had by someone; by Paul, whoever, wherever, whichever he is. A Lucretian vision of matter in motion.

This multiplicity of non-self-coincident times and figures and spaces seems made to illustrate Agamben's reading of the Pauline legacy as an opening of the non-self-identical. In this light, it is worth recalling that the conversion of St. Paul is not itself a singular event. It is told three times in Acts, at 9.1–19, 22.6–16, 26.12–18, the latter two times supposedly by Paul. The three accounts fail to tally.<sup>31</sup> In question is whether Paul's companions hear the voice or see the light; whether Paul is momentarily blinded or not; whether the commission to found a church is made directly to him or by another. Crucially, the final telling makes Paul the sole witness to the event and the sole conveyor of it. This emphasis matches the point in Badiou's analysis, by which Paul stands for a singular universal subject. Tintoretto's painting, on the other hand, disperses Paul, morcellates his identity into multiple figures who are and are not Paul, who are Paul only insofar as he is non-self-identical. The painting thus maintains the contradictions in Acts, rather than attempting to overcome them. Nor is this only a feature of the Paul(s) in Acts; as Pauline scholars stress, how and when and to what extent Paul himself tells of his conversion in his letters (and indeed which of the letters are authentically Paul's, and what authenticity even means) are all in question.

Paula Fredriksen has analyzed these multiple contradictions, noting how the Acts account centers Pauline theology (the witnessing of the resurrection) on a conversion experience that does not seem central to Paul's epistles.<sup>32</sup> As she argues, it is the theological Paul, the church founder, who is created by the conversion in Acts, which retrospectively provides a moment of absolute change that seems belied by Paul's letters, and was likely not the experience of the historical Paul, for whom belief in Jesus as messiah might have marked him as belonging to one group of Jews rather than another. Fredriksen thus suggests that the converted Paul is necessarily a retrospective Paul created by the needs of the writer of Acts, writing after Paul's death and as part of the founding of a church that needed to differentiate itself from Jewish believers. Fredriksen's two Pauls—Jewish and Christian—in time and in retrospect, are another example of the new Paul of contemporary Pauline scholarship to which the interventions of Agamben and Badiou also belong. Although she does not mention it, another context for the group that would become Christians may lie in the connection between this voluntary association and the kinds of communities founded by epicureans around the teachings of Epicurus, communities like the early Christians that cut across former group-

ings of class and ethnos and were composed of men and women.<sup>33</sup> And, as Fredriksen emphasizes, the two Augustines that we have encountered are divided precisely by the reading of Paul that marks Augustine's own conversion. As everyone knows, Augustine's conversion was Pauline—and entirely aleatory; responding to the call to take up the book and read, Augustine performed a *sortes Virgilianiae*, alighting on Romans 13.13: "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities, not in contention and envy, but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ and make not provision for the flesh in concupiscences." This sentence, it needs to be noted, sounds remarkably like one found in the letter of Epicurus to Menoecus: "For it is not continuous drinking and revels, nor the enjoyment of women and young boys, nor of fish and other viands that a luxurious table holds, which makes for a pleasant life, but sober reasoning, which examines the motives for every choice and avoidance, and which drives away those opinions resulting in the greatest disturbances to the soul" (132). These conjunctions, I would venture, impinge on Tintoretto's painting.

In its jumble of bodies, its vectoring of energies thrusting from the upper left down to the lower right, but also away from the center to the right and to the left; in this opening of vistas where, the more one looks, the more bodies, the more parts of bodies, of men and horses, appear beneath the looming clouds above that seem as easily more matter in motion, and against which or from which trees and rocks emerge or are seen, what stands out is not any single figure but rather parts of figures and repeating patterns of color; from these one picks out bodies, armor, human flesh, horseflesh.<sup>34</sup> Almost at the center of the painting, there is one piece of human flesh of which it is difficult to say whether it is a back or front, upper torso or lower. It looks most like a buttock. Slightly off center, it is, in the reading I am offering, the queer center of the painting, a bit of flesh only legible as such, a basic matter from which we are all made, and are all, in this respect, the same. A bit of flesh that might be the site of the body as refuse, but if so, it is not refused, for to do so would mean to deny the significance of the incarnation as well as the revelation that reorients Paul's life on earth.<sup>35</sup>

The painting offers a kind of atomization and redistribution of flesh that takes place under the force of a materialized impulse; in the painting, bodies, time and space, heaven and earth, divine and human, have undergone a transformation, a revelation of a basic material connection. The sameness lies in the ground from which it arises. This ground could be the very materialization for which, in Augustine's phrasing, the head calls out, a reminder perhaps that what exists is owing to a creator whose function it is to create, that is, who is realized in the very matter which certain Christian readings would wish to deny (and so doing would deny creation). Nothing will recon-

cile a divine account of origin to Lucretius, to be sure; but it helps to see how put this way, the creator is as easily a kind of back formation demanded by the sheer fact of existence. We approach here, perhaps, what Žižek calls the perverse core of Christianity. In part extending Badiou's work in a direction that allows a much fuller consideration of Christianity, Žižek takes the figure of Christ to indicate the ways in which the divine needs and realizes itself in the world; in creation and incarnation, it marks its own limitation, its lack, its need for the flesh that Augustine also remarks. The sacrifice on the cross, Žižek writes, echoing Badiou's *New Beginning*, inaugurates the Event as "a pure empty sign. We have to work to generate its meaning," he concludes.<sup>36</sup> "Perhaps the true achievement of Christianity is to elevate a loving (imperfect) Being to the place of God, that is, of ultimate perfection" (115). This elevation is, of course, an opening. Its realization is ours. This death of God is not tantamount to humanity made divine; rather, it frees the human for the infinitizing experience of material possibility of what can be made. In Tintoretto's painting, we might find that material possibility in the dark ground (it is Caravaggio's as well, their inheritance from Giorgione) from which figures emerge, to the extent that they do.

This is the ground that Gilles Deleuze remarks in *The Fold*, his study of the baroque: "in place of the white chalk or plaster that primes the canvas, Tintoretto and Caravaggio use a dark, red-brown background on which they place the thickest shadows, and paint directly by shading toward the shadows."<sup>37</sup> Deleuze refers to Tintoretto, and in particular to his *Last Judgment* (Madonna dell' Orto, Venice), several times in the definitional third chapter of *The Fold*, where the baroque is said to combine and separate what might be opposites in just the same way Caravaggio or Tintoretto are exemplary for their *chiaroscuro*. Metaphysical and physical are not the same, nor are they opposed; they inhabit a single world; the baroque maintains sameness-in-difference. To contextualize Deleuze's use of Tintoretto is to recognize it as a recent episode in a phenomenon towards which Anna Laura Lepschy points in her survey of the reception of Tintoretto; the final chapter of her book considers "Tintoretto and the Philosopher."<sup>38</sup> The philosopher who most engages her is Jean-Paul Sartre, whose unfinished project on Tintoretto resulted in two essays that appeared in his lifetime and a third published posthumously. As early as "What is Writing?," Sartre presented his central thesis about Tintoretto, where the yellow sky of his San Rocco *Crucifixion* is treated as a materialization, "it is an anguish become a thing," and is found on a canvas that is only about "the proper quality of things, . . . their impermeability, their extension, their blind permanence, their externality, and that infinity of relations which they maintain with other things."<sup>39</sup> Sartre, in his own terms, finds in Tintoretto something like the "new relatedness" that

Bersani and Dutoit claim for Caravaggio, and does so in terms that sound Lucretian.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, in his discussion of Tintoretto's *St. George and the Dragon* (National Gallery, London), Sartre argues that any ostensibly sacred meaning to the rescue of the maiden from the dragon has been replaced by an entirely materialized scene in which human effort, insofar as it is even possible, is all that one can believe in, insofar as one can. For the human is placed in relation to the nonhuman, and the possibilities of agency are limited. Tintoretto suggests this by the figure of the woman in front, who seems to be fleeing or falling; by the fact that George's lance is hidden; and by the corpse that occupies the middle ground between the woman and her supposed savior. The painting displays "inhuman forces" (49), Sartre claims, and what is happening remains obscure, indeterminate, elsewhere; the painting is, for Sartre, a manifestation of the *clinamen* (50; Sartre uses the term).

This is a space of infinite forces, decenterings, and disconnections; the figures in *St. George and the Dragon*, as is usually the case in Tintoretto, are separated, unrelated, and yet in the grip of something that exceeds their grasp, something that swirls through and around them. In his posthumous, unedited "Saint Marc et son double," Sartre emphasizes this materiality by pointing to the ways in which Tintoretto conveys a sense of weight. Writing of his *Miracle of the Slave* (Accademia), Sartre stunningly notes how the miraculous thrust of the saint, hurtling downward, is one in which the supernatural is at the same time merely the law of gravity, that is, a display of the perpendicular force pulling bodies to the ground. "Ce missionnaire est un missile" (176). For Sartre that force explains the swirling unstable bodies in Tintoretto's paintings, features in them like the stairway in the *Conversion of St. Paul* to which we have attended, where the connection upwards and towards the divine becomes a thrust downwards towards materialization. As for Deleuze, the divine and human realms fall in and away from each other; separated by a force which underlies them both, and which rives them apart. For Tintoretto, Sartre claims, painting has no other aim than to represent this force, the weight of matter ("Le peinture n'a d'autre objet que la matière" [176]) and whatever might be supernatural is materialized as natural. For Sartre, Tintoretto's sense of mass thus anticipates the conceptualizations of Galileo and Newton, and the law of nature might be for him, as it will be for Spinoza, equivalent to God.

For Sartre, matter is a recalcitrant, deidealizing force. It is indestructible, like gravity or, I would add, like the atom for Lucretius, an invisible force underlying everything, pulling all creation towards a principle of existence that undermines visible hierarchies and differences, distinctions belied by material identity. Mark's descent to rescue a slave is, for Sartre, where Tintoretto's Christian materialism manifests his social vision. The leveling

energies of the cosmos are the natural inhuman. Epitomized for Sartre in the social relations in which Tintoretto is dislocated, as the man Sartre names “the pariah of Venice,” someone entirely of the place and despised for pointing to the end of its ascendancy: the death of God and the death of Titian are what Tintoretto proclaims in his “new beginning” (355), a beginning in the activity of painting which is its own meaning (Sartre refuses a hermeneutics or a deciphering as much as Bersani and Dutoit do). For Sartre, Tintoretto’s philosophical materialism is rooted in the materiality of social relations, a point explored in Tom Nichols’ fine recent book on Tintoretto. For Nichols, the paradox of Tintoretto is that of “the maverick individualist who identifies with the nameless majority” (22). The social possibility of an equalization that nonetheless preserves difference is what is being glimpsed. It is subtended by an inhuman materiality. From Sartre to Deleuze;<sup>41</sup> and from Deleuze to Badiou, who also mentions Tintoretto’s *Last Judgment* in his study of St. Paul (94):<sup>42</sup> I close with this glance at a variety of materialist critics. With their Tintoretto(s) I would ally the analysis that I have offered here as a first step in rethinking material relations in Renaissance contexts and their place in a materialist philosophical tradition that Louis Althusser, in his final work, offered as a hidden/repressed radical form of what he termed “aleatory materialism” that extended, for him, from Epicurus to Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza, Rousseau, Marx, Heidegger, Deleuze and Derrida. It is, finally, in the context that Tintoretto may be located.<sup>43</sup>



Would it be possible to extend this connection further? At the very least, it is worth mentioning that the place where Sartre meets Bersani is in Jean Genet. It was Sartre who sainted Genet as a pariah figure accepting his status as the one who ruins the social contract, a version of the figure that Lee Edelman has recently dubbed the *sinthomosexual*.<sup>44</sup> In *Homos*, Bersani insists on the outlaw quality of Genet (of Gide and Proust as well). Going well beyond the reversal of Sartre, Bersani’s Genet refuses all forms of the human to relocate a basis for sociality in asociality and a fundamental inhuman homo-ness that is the refusal of human relationality. Bersani locates his utopic moment in a rooftop scene of sex *a tergo* between two men, both facing in the same direction, but not engaged in the face-to-face encounter so favored as a model for self-other relations. Genet himself theorizes this position in an essay written in two columns, one about Rembrandt, the other about seeing an abject man on a train. Genet’s destruction of his writing about Rembrandt—his sending the fragments down the toilet—and his seeing himself in the repellent man on the train found life and art in the recognition that a fundamental materiality is the basis for connections: “No man was my

brother: each man was myself.”<sup>45</sup> This abrades all idealistic pretension. Fascinated by materiality more than by subject matter, and thus in quite a different register from Henry James, Genet’s fusing of life and art still resonates with the mournful mortality that James located in Tintoretto. It is precisely on the basis of the fact that we are all such bodies that queer possibility resides. “As soon as persons are posited, the war begins,” Bersani writes in “Is the Rectum a Grave?”; queer projects flourish when they are not.<sup>46</sup>

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> These essays are conveniently gathered in Henry James, *Collected Travel Writings: The Continent* (New York: Library of America, 1993), from which I cite.
- <sup>2</sup> Some of these connections are persuasively suggested in Tom Nichols and Tessa Hadley, “James, Ruskin, and Tintoretto,” *Henry James Review* 23.3 (Fall 2002): 294–317.
- <sup>3</sup> Leo Bersani, “Sociality and Sexuality,” *Critical Inquiry* 26.4 (Summer 2000): 641–56; the citations are from the last page of the essay.
- <sup>4</sup> Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Caravaggio’s Secrets* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1998), p.60. Further citations will be from this text.
- <sup>5</sup> A summary of this scholarship is offered by J. M. Everts in the entry on “Conversion and Call of Paul,” in Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, ed., *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), pp. 156–63. Subsequent texts would include Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, tr. Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *Reading Derrida/Thinking Paul* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), all emphasizing continuities between Paul and Judaism, a point also to be found in some recent literary revaluations of Paul, including Lisa Lampert, *Gender and Jewish Difference from Paul to Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) and Julia Reinhard Lupton, *Citizen-Saints* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
- <sup>6</sup> It might be possible to ally this interpretation to Alain Badiou’s recent claims for Pauline universalism as the refusal of any form of minority identity in *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, tr. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 4–15. Further citations refer to this edition.
- <sup>7</sup> Tintoretto’s St. Mark in his *Miracle of the Slave* (Accademia [Venice]) was influenced by the foreshortened Jesus in Michelangelo’s depiction of the conversion of St. Paul. Walter Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 19, connects the figure of Paul to the slave in Tintoretto’s painting, ignoring the fact that the figure serves as a kind of reverse mirror of the hurtling saint above. Indeed, to the degree that such mirroring is involved, Michelangelo’s Jesus might be echoed in Caravaggio’s Paul.
- <sup>8</sup> In effect, performing a conversion. Insofar as Bersani and Dutoit are influenced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s conception in *The Visible and the Invisible*, tr. Alphonso Lingis, ed. Claude Lefort (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968) of the “flesh of the world” that overcomes the subject-object distinction, it’s worth noting

that while Merleau-Ponty claims that the concept “has no name in any philosophy” (147), he ends by delivering it as “the Being of being” (151) “with words for those who have ears to hear” (155), a Pauline revelation that suggests the theological proximity of this flesh to the incarnation.

- <sup>9</sup> Graham L. Hammill, *Sexuality and Form* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); see p. 83 for the suggestion that sexuality in Caravaggio might be allied to the anti-relational homosexuality advocated by Bersani; p. 93 for a discussion of the Lacanian Thing; on which, see also Richard Halpern, *Shakespeare's Perfume* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), ch. 4, “Lacan's Anal Thing.” In *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), Judith Butler contemplates a similar presubjective situation without recourse to Lacanian terminology.
- <sup>10</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 26.
- <sup>11</sup> Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Caravaggio* (London: BFI, 1999), p. 30.
- <sup>12</sup> See Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, tr. William Granger Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 1:119–21; the discussion throughout is about how Paul's conversion was “miraculous,” and Augustine is cited numerous times to further the argument.
- <sup>13</sup> Leo Steinberg, *Michelangelo's Last Paintings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 41.
- <sup>14</sup> The question of the body in Paul is itself more complicated than the flesh/spirit dualism that is usually supposed; for some recent discussion of this, see Boyarin as well as Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).
- <sup>15</sup> For some stimulating discussion of these ideas, see Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Duncan F. Kennedy, *Rethinking Reality* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002); James I. Porter, “Love of Life: Lucretius to Freud,” in Shadi Bartsch and Thomas Bartscherer, ed., *Erotikon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 113–41. This form of life is moreover not alive precisely because it always is, that is, it is mortal and immortal at the same time.
- <sup>16</sup> Stephen J. Campbell, “Giorgione's *Tempest*, *Studiolo* Culture, and the Renaissance Lucretius,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 56 (2003): 299–332, from which further citations are drawn.
- <sup>17</sup> Christopher Braider, “The Fountain of Narcissus: The Invention of Subjectivity and the Pauline Ontology of Art in Caravaggio and Rembrandt,” *Comparative Literature* 50.4 (Fall 1998): 286–316 makes a similar move when he attaches representations of the conversion of St. Paul to a Pauline ontology in which matter is redeemed by being spiritualized in a movement from flesh to spirit in which life overcomes death.
- <sup>18</sup> See Eugenio Garin, “Ricerche sull' epicureismo del Quattrocento,” in Università di Genova Facoltà di Lettere, ed., *Epicurea in Memoriam Hectoris Bignone* (Genoa: Istituto di Filologia Classica, 1959), pp. 217–31.
- <sup>19</sup> Some of these connections, within the milieu of quattrocento Florentine neoplatonism, are explored in Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance* (New York: Norton, 1968). Campbell's analysis is opposed to the kind of programmatic iconographic reading favored by Wind, rather resembling the intellectual/cultural approach of Charles Dempsey, who, for example counters Wind in *The Portrayal of Love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) in a reading of Botticelli that draws upon Lucretius in ways akin to Campbell's deployment of the poem as a set of detached and detachable parts ready for reassembly.
- <sup>20</sup> Campbell particularly emphasizes work by Giovanni Pontano, a position disputed by

- Charlotte Goddard, "Pontano's use of the didactic genre: rhetoric, irony and the manipulation of Lucretius in *Urania*," *Renaissance Studies* 5.3 (1991): 250–62. Goddard seems correct—and indeed the citations in Campbell confirm that Pontano's ambition was Lucretian but his thought was not.
- <sup>21</sup> See Ezio Raimondi, "Il primo commento umanistico a Lucrezio," in *Tra Latino e Volgare per Carlo Dionisotti* (Medioevo e Umanesimo 18 [1974]), pp. 641–74; William L. Hine, "Inertia and Scientific Law in Sixteenth-Century Commentaries on Lucretius," *Renaissance Quarterly* 48.4 (Winter 1995): 728–41.
- <sup>22</sup> For a bibliographical account, see Michael D. Reeve, "The Italian Tradition of Lucretius," *Italia Medioevale e Umanistica* 23 (1980): 27–48.
- <sup>23</sup> David Rosand, *Painting in Sixteenth-Century Venice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), describes this through the term *colorito*: "*Colorito* is in fact an additive process, the building up of the picture from the dark, prepared ground of the canvas to the final modifying glazes; it is the technique of painting in oils first demonstrated by Giorgione" (22).
- <sup>24</sup> Guillaume Cassegrain, "'Ces choses ont été des figures de ce qui nous concerne': Une lecture de la *Conversion de Saint Paul du Tintoret*," *Venezia cinquecento* 6.12 (1996): 55–85, from which citations are drawn. The standard account of the sources for the painting is found in the catalogue entry in Rodolfo Pallucchini and Paola Rossi, *Tintoretto: Le opere sacre e profane*, 2 vols. (Milan: Electa, 1982), 1:142–43. See also Roland Krischel, *Tintoretto* (Cologne: Könemann, 2000), p. 10.
- <sup>25</sup> Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art: Renaissance, Mannerism, Baroque* (New York: Vintage, 1957), p. 139. Hauser has in mind the extraordinary swirling God of the painting of Moses striking the rock (Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice), where the release of water from stone seems to relate to the energy of the figure, subordinating it to that energy. A similar point about the very late depiction of *Paradise* (Doge's Palace, Venice) is made by Otto Benesch, *The Art of the Renaissance in Northern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1945), who describes the figures as "freely hovering and revolving celestial bodies, who perform lawful, mathematically exact motions, radiant from an inner light, each one driven by its own spiritual power" (128); he suggestively links Tintoretto to Giordano Bruno and Copernicus, a point I reiterate below. Lucretian atomism is the unstated link between these philosophical, scientific, and artistic instances. Tintoretto's drawing of the physical and spiritual together is argued by Michael Levey, "Tintoretto and the Theme of Miraculous Intervention," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 113 (1965): 707–25, while his repeated depictions of the last supper have been taken to indicate a focus on the eucharist as an alimentary act of body and spirit at once, something moreover to be connected to Tintoretto's attachment to "common human dignity," as Paul Hills pursues "the kinship of spiritual and physical succour," in "Piety and Patronage in Cinquecento Venice: Tintoretto and the Scuole del Sacramento," *Art History* 6 (1983): 30–43; p. 35 cited.
- <sup>26</sup> This kind of pastiche, Tom Nichols notes, *Tintoretto: Tradition and Identity* (London: Reaktion, 1999), Tintoretto indulges in the roughly contemporary painting of *Sf. Ursula and Her Virgins* (San Lazzaro dei Mendicanti, Venice), where the female figures are painted in the rather old-fashioned manner of Carpaccio, while a muscled and foreshortened angel in the sky, carrying the signs of martyrdom, is also the bearer of Tintoretto's self-conscious modernity, p. 63. Krischel, *Tintoretto*, pp. 6–29, notes similar invocations and disposals of earlier models in several early paintings of Tintoretto.
- <sup>27</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, tr. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

- <sup>28</sup> As I have been suggesting, the theological aspects of the conversion of St. Paul, and its influence on paintings of this subject, cannot be ignored entirely. Its influence on Italian painting is studied in Mario Thomas Martone, "The Theme of the Conversion of Paul in Italian Paintings from the Early Christian Period to the Early Renaissance," New York University dissertation, 1978.
- <sup>29</sup> The sign of this in Badiou is the way in which he must vacate such categories as "Jew" and "woman" of any meaningful content in order to affirm their inclusion in the Christian universe; Agamben, on the other hand, makes "Christian" a synonym for an identity that is not one.
- <sup>30</sup> St. Augustine, *Sermons*, tr. Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1994), p.59, from which further citations are drawn.
- <sup>31</sup> See Charles W. Hedrick, "Paul's Conversion/Call: A Comparative Analysis of the Three Reports in Acts," *JBL* 100.3 (1981): 415–32. Hedrick provides convenient charts of the differences in the three accounts (417–19), but seeks to reconcile them to a Lukan intentionality in which differences are meant only to supplement and complement, not to contradict. Hence, Hedrick finds a single purpose of church founding rather than anything like Agamben's opening.
- <sup>32</sup> Paula Fredriksen, "Paul and Augustine: Conversion Narratives, Orthodox Traditions, and the Retrospective Self," *Journal of Theological Studies*, ns 37.1 (April 1986): 3–34.
- <sup>33</sup> This connection is affirmed in Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983, 2003), 83–84, while an exaggerated set of comparisons of Pauline and epicurean beliefs is argued by Norman Wentworth DeWitt, *St. Paul and Epicurus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954).
- <sup>34</sup> It takes a while even to find the figures one would suppose for this subject, God and Paul, although Tintoretto has not gone as far as Brueghel does in a painting in the Kunsthistorisches Museum (Vienna) where Paul is all but invisible in the press of figures.
- <sup>35</sup> See *St. Paul*, p. 56. Certainly Paul affirms Christian identity in such terms. What is remarkable, however, is how adamantly Badiou rejects all form of identity as forms of victimization. Whatever Badiou means by the opening to the "unconventional" that is the Pauline legacy, it seems worth saying that his universalism (which allows forms of identity only once they have been dissolved of all identitarian marks save those of the universal Christian subject) sometimes seems the same as the liberal subject that he deplores and which he connects, by way of capitalism, to minoritized identity rejected and yet incorporated into the market economy.
- <sup>36</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2003), p.136.
- <sup>37</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold*, tr. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 31.
- <sup>38</sup> Anna Laura Lepschy, *Tintoretto Observed* (Ravenna: Longo, 1983). The chapter summarizes a 1954 essay by Jules Vuillemin, as well as two essays by Sartre.
- <sup>39</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Essays in Existentialism*, ed. Wade Baskin (New York: Citadel, 1965, 1993), p. 305. This volume also includes a translation of "The Venetian Pariah." "Saint-Georges et le Dragon," *L'Arc* 30 (1967): 35–50 and "Saint Marc et son double," *Obliques* 24–25 (1981): 171–202 are cited (in my own translations) below.
- <sup>40</sup> George Howard Bauer, *Sartre and the Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 120, emphasizes "becoming" rather than "being" as central to the appeal of Tintoretto as opposed to Titian for Sartre.
- <sup>41</sup> An intervening figure would be Régis Debray, who in "Le Tintoret ou Le Sentiment panique de la vie," in *Éloges* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), pp. 13–57, responds to Sartre,

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but in an attempt to reidealize and spiritualize matter; his argument is made in the service of definition of the baroque.

<sup>42</sup> *St. Paul*, p. 94; characteristically, Badiou turns the divisions of the Last Judgment into a universalizing possibility.

<sup>43</sup> See Louis Althusser, "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter," *Philosophy of the Encounter*, ed. François Matheron and Oliver Corpet, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London:Verso, 2006), pp. 163–207. Althusser's reading of the Heideggerian "es gibt" as an all but epicurean announcement of existence detached from an metaphysical principle of origin might be useful to counter the transcendentalizing uses of Heidegger to be found in Bersani and Dutoit.

<sup>44</sup> See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), ch. 2.

<sup>45</sup> Jean Genet, "What Remains of Rembrandt Torn into Little Squares All the Same Size and Shot Down the Toilet," in *Fragments of the Artwork*, tr. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 97.

<sup>46</sup> Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (Winter 1987), 218.

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