

## Dead or Immortal? The Future of Queer Theory

James Penney  
Trent University

### Dead

One of the most radically negative and potentially universalizing formulations of queerness can be found in the work of Lee Edelman, whose provocative *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* has been adopted, alongside Leo Bersani's writing,<sup>1</sup> as a linchpin of the so-called antisocial turn in queer theory writ large. Although officially, it aims to outline a negative political logic that moves beyond a merely oppositional stance, Edelman's version of queerness defines itself nonetheless against what he calls reproductive futurism. This phrase refers to an all-encompassing ideological framework which, in his view, draws for its libidinal support on a fantasy centred around the image of the child. For Edelman, the seductively conservative power of this image enforces the "absolute privilege of heteronormativity," a privilege he views as the "organizing principle of communal relations" (2). In other words, the child is the very horizon of meaning for social life as such.

Edelman's work as a whole mounts a ferocious attack against a familiar 'family values' fetishization of the construction of childhood as a time of pre-sexual innocence that paradoxically grounds the very possibility of the future. We know that this construction, traceable in the Western tradition at least as far back as European Romanticism, was dealt a devastating (though unfortunately not lethal) blow at the dawn of the twentieth century at the hands of Freudian psychoanalysis. As monotheism does for the hereafter, the ideal of childhood installs the future as society's very *raison d'être*. Defining queerness as a force of immanent resistance to the terms of a social life turned to the future in this sense, Edelman enjoins his

queer-identified reader to resist the calls for positive alternatives against which purely negative critical enterprises such as his own routinely come up. Significantly, Edelman develops an interpretation of Freud's idea of the death drive to oppose any and all mobilizations of the old philosophical category of 'the Good'. In other words, Edelman bravely denies the basic and widely held premise that a politics must advocate for any positive social value or order whatsoever.

Edelman's development of the significance of the death drive is sound to the extent that the death drive and the terms that define the social world's intelligibility make up the terms of an antinomy. The unresolvable tension between the two forces exposes an underlying disjunction between the psychic and the social realms that can never be rejoined. Although his text demonstrates no awareness of the link, Edelman's insistence on exposing society's inconsistency, on the constitutive inability of any social order to effect a gesture of absolute inclusion, covers the same theoretical ground on which Slavoj Žižek treads when he writes about what he calls political ontology's absent centre.<sup>2</sup> As many will already know, Žižek develops this thematic in dialogue with the work of French post-Althusserians Alain Badiou, Étienne Balibar, and Jacques Rancière. There will be significantly more on Badiou in the second part of this essay.

Edelman's fundamental claim in *No Future* is that queerness signals not merely the abjected outside of social arrangements: those persons or groups who cannot be represented or remain unintelligible within an existing hegemonic field. This insufficient premise assumes that with a programme of expansive reform, for instance, queers could potentially be integrated with the existing social logic. Instead, Edelman claims for queerness a more radical negativity that exposes the inconsistency of the social as such. This negativity casts the very terms of the social

into incoherence or disarray, throwing a spanner in that subtle cultural machine that separates out appropriate social actors from their inappropriate peers.

Some politically-minded readers may already have remarked that Edelman's position runs against the tenets of the most fundamental assumptions of the socialist tradition. Indeed, the admirable doctrinal discipline with which Edelman restricts his argument's articulation to a purely negative mode seems designed to provoke or invite accusations of nihilism. Edelman's enlistment of psychoanalysis, and more specifically the work of Jacques Lacan, therefore poses an urgent question concerning the problematic relationship that inheres both historically and theoretically between the Freudian tradition and revolutionary or transformational socialist politics. In short, *No Future* implies that psychoanalytic theory is incompatible with any emancipatory politics based on a sense of hope for a better future. In the rest of this essay, I will try to develop why I think this argument is wrong, going on to propose an alternative, more desirable assessment of the consequences of the death drive in psychoanalytic theory.

Edelman develops the concept of the death drive in a most uncompromising fashion. For him, Freud's idea discredits by implication *all political thought* to the extent that this thought remains wedded to an idea of the future attributed with teleological, narrative, redemptive, or progressive qualities. To be sure – Edelman's training is literary, not philosophical – this thematic of futurism encompasses a broad cross-section of ideas of time that haven't always been associated with one another in the philosophical tradition. Nonetheless, the argument is designed, in perhaps too unsubtle a way, to sweep away in a single gesture all thinking about time based on any of these four basic assumptions: (a) that time has a predetermined end; in other words, that the future will come to fruition at some definitive moment; (b) that time tells a story with, as they say, a beginning, a middle, and an end; (c) that the future contains a transcendental horizon,

which will bestow retrospective significance on past failures, on past suffering; and (d) that things can or will get better as time goes by. In sum, Edelman's discourse aims to "refuse the insistence of hope itself as affirmation." In his view, this insistence "is always affirmation of an order whose refusal will register as unthinkable, irresponsible, inhumane" (4).

The basic problem with Edelman's position as I see it relates to its undialectical notion of a radically pure brand of negativity. Arguably, this version of the negative sees Edelman shirk responsibility for the content of his own argument, and he enlists Lacan's idea of the symbolic for support. Evidence: Edelman denies the "imperative to immure [his stance or argument] in some stable and positive *form*." Now, Edelman understands Lacan's concept of "the Symbolic" to mean that "nothing, and certainly not what we call the 'good', can ever have any assurance at all" (4). To be precise, the difficulty lies not so much in the statement itself, but rather in Edelman's assumption that it isn't a position – in other words, an argument that's as much obliged to offer support for itself as any other. The radically negative orientation of Edelman's discourse unhelpfully ignores the enunciative paradox that makes of the denial of the legitimacy of any statement as much of a statement as any positive assertion. Further, the argument makes the unnecessary assumption that any construct of 'the good' must be amenable to symbolic accommodation; in other words, that the normativity it prescribes must conservatively uphold a positive value, one which lends itself to articulation in the terms that make up ambient social knowledges.

Like so much of the significantly American poststructuralist political hyperscepticism with which it shares its main features, Edelman's nihilistic salvo makes the associated and fatal mistake of placing *all* allusions to the future in thought under the banner of what Lacan calls the imaginary. In other words, Edelman's discussion assumes that a retrograde belief in a time to

come when all social antagonism, all conflict and dissatisfaction, all psychopathology has been eradicated inheres analytically, as Kant would say, in the very concept of futurity. Edelman proceeds as if there's no other way to think about the future; all this imaginary baggage comes unalterably pre-packaged whenever we attempt to think through what comes next.

By contrast, Lacan himself had a different and subtler way of conceiving of the subject's desiring relation to time's unfolding. In his Rome Discourse, for instance, Lacan emphasized the importance to psychoanalysis of the future perfect (*futur antérieur*), the verbal tense that looks back at the past from a hypothetical moment to come.<sup>3</sup> Clinically, the analysand looks forward to a time when its impenetrable symptom will have acquired an explanatory meaning, which in turn has an impact of the symptom's significance in the present. The future perfect also illuminates Freud's idea that the threat of castration has a period of latency: Castration anxiety will only set in after the boy's perception of female lack has retrospectively provided the previously uttered threat of punishment with a concrete, redoubtable consequence. In short, the present becomes what it is only from the retrospective point of view of a future moment, at which point, of course, it has itself become part of the past.

Lacan also developed in his teaching a related idea of logical time, premised on the notion that any act or utterance must be based on what he calls anticipated certitude. Somewhat analogously, this concept implies the projection into the future of a hypothetical certainty, which provides a fictitious rationale for one's intervention in the present.<sup>4</sup> In other words, we can only justify a present action on the assumption that some missing piece of knowledge will become available in the future to support our decision in the here-and-now. For Lacan, psychoanalytic temporality's dependence on an irreducible reference, however projective, to a future with the power to change the past is a consequence of time's mediation by language, by the signifier. We

begin to see how Edelman's speculations about a queer present made possible by the radical negation of the future abstracts undesirably from the subject's circumscription by language – the very same 'symbolic', in other words, on which the rest of his argument fundamentally depends.

We can make the same point in a different way with reference to the psychoanalytic concept of transference. From this perspective, Edelman's argument discounts the irreducibility of our transference investment in the Other. As Lacan argued with his axiom *les non-dupes errent* (those who are not duped err), it's never a wise move to think that our knowledge and actions don't assume an unconscious belief in the Other's reliability or consistency – the very same consistency that our intellectual arguments and rationalizations will insistently deny. Simply put, Edelman's argument fails to take account of desire *in time*. The absolute present he wishes to associate with queerness simply isn't available. *Pace* Edelman, the future can be conceived with perfect legitimacy. But this is so only if our idea of the future takes the form of the past of a projected later moment. There is no guarantee that, at this later moment, things won't be significantly different than they are now; that a horizon-changing event might by that time have taken place.

Crucially for my own argument, psychoanalytic temporality is thus a temporality of discontinuity, a discontinuity that also describes the present itself. This temporality features moments of disorienting and unthinkable, and therefore radical, change. Not only can this change be assessed only retroactively, but future events are also likely to change that retroactive assessment in such a way that the meaning or significance of the past, even the most recent past, is constantly subject to change in light of further anticipated retroactive assessments of the same kind. At any point in time, in other words, something can happen which, from the perspective of a later moment, will have literally changed the past. In sum, Edelman's framework offers an

ahistorical and metaphysical binary between the present insistence of the negative and the future aspiration for meaning. Alternatively, Lacan's logic of time formulates a *dialectic* between the symbolic order's contingent closure and this closure's inevitable failure. The fact that knowledge can only fail to think through the process of radical change – a thesis, by the way, with which Badiou takes issue – doesn't mean that change never happens. On the contrary, it implies the 'impossible' possibility that what, in a given situation, seemingly could never happen can indeed take place at any time.

In this precise sense, Edelman's argument expresses a paradoxical *idealism of the death drive*. It mistakenly assumes that human life can be lived purely on this level of an immanent present; that language can be perfectly reduced to the nonsense of what Lacan called *lalangue*, and is therefore incapable of producing effects of social signification; that collective life can be lived without the intervention of a spectral Other that imposes on human interaction not only a horizon of meaning, however contingent, imperfect, incomplete, or anticipated, but also an ineradicable and unconscious transferential dimension of *belief*. As Žižek endlessly but instructively develops Lacan's thesis, the Other's powers of determination increase in direct proportion with the denial of our own complicity in its effective functioning.

But there's a further, even more central, complication embedded in Edelman's discussion. This one is not only especially germane to my concerns in this paper, but also typical of queer theory's characteristically ambivalent flirtation with, and ultimate dismissal of, the category of the universal. On one level, the link Edelman posits between the death drive and the antisocial aspect of queerness makes tangible a horizon of exceptionlessness: No matter what one's professed orientation, sexuality *as such* grossly oversteps the species function of reproduction. We know that Freud already fully elaborated this thesis in *Beyond the Pleasure*

*Principle* (1920), for example, and that Lacan expanded on its implications with what he called, in reference to Marx's labour theory of value, *plus-de jouir* or surplus enjoyment. On another level, however, Edelman's discussion is pitched against the conceptual couplet of heteronormativity and reproductive futurism. In consequence, his celebration of the apolitical value – or anti-value – of queerness only gains significance against the backdrop of the assumption of the effectiveness of a universe of normative heterosexuality or reproductive sexuality. This assumption is then drawn upon to attribute by specious opposition a minoritarian or vanguard edge to the queer.

Although it points in the direction of a place where everyone's sexuality can be defined as queer, Edelman's notion of queerness, like so many others, is ultimately reserved for an elite constituency whose members have violated, as he conceives them, the temporal terms of reproductive futurism. More concretely, we can presume that those homosexuals who have (or have adopted) children will not be issued membership cards, despite the fact that their sexualities, just as much as the Edelmanian queer's, overstep the bounds of what is required for species survival. In the end, Edelman's argument winds up embracing wholeheartedly the ultimate poststructuralist fetish-values of difference and particularity. Edelman's 'no future' queerness fails the test of universality because its address retains an element of differential selectivity by pitting the breeders (and the other types of parent, even the 'queer' ones) against all the rest.

More helpfully, Juliet Mitchell argued over forty years ago that the classical Marxist 'dissolution of the family' thesis *à la* Friedrich Engels – very different from Edelman's, of course – was both vague and unrealistic. According to Engels, the emancipation of women depends on the absolute destruction of the family as a form of social organization, a destruction

to be effected by the family's revolutionary socialization through obligatory collective child-reading, for instance. Mitchell argued instead for a politicization of the historical forms of the family, recognizing, in anticipation of her psychoanalytic vocation, that the passionate investment of many women in maternity and early childhood (to say nothing of men) would never permit the creation of a feminist consensus in favour of a radically socialized post-family utopia.<sup>5</sup> Indeed there's a strange underground complicity between the radical humanist anti-familialism of classical Marxism and the radically anti- or post-humanist anti-familialist nihilism of death drive queer theory. Psychoanalysis could only entertain the prospect of either utopian form – the ultra-social 'communist' or the anti-social queer – with the deepest skepticism.

By assuming the possibility of a zero-degree social life devoid of any form of the family whatsoever, these discourses lie vulnerable to the charge of idealism. By contrast, there's every reason to think that the proper socialist goal in this context should be to continue to broaden contemporary understandings of the family, and to provide women (and men) with the freedom to choose to take up early childhood parental responsibilities themselves, or else share them with regulated, adequately funded, and collectively organized state institutions. Although it's certainly a useful tool to wield against the ideologues of family values, Edelman's polemic against "the Child" contributes precisely nothing to the accomplishment of this socialist goal.

Last but not least, it must also be said that the elitist minoritarianism of Edelman's discussion is based on a reductive misreading of Lacan's understanding of the universal. A consideration of this misreading will help to refine my criticism of Edelman's provocative and influential argument. It will also suggest an alternative interpretation of Lacanian psychoanalysis that calls into question the apolitical and nihilistic consequences Edelman attributes to it. Finally, my alternative consideration will present a more orthodox Lacanian idea of the unconscious, an

idea I will then lend for productive comparison with the *genericity* that characterizes Alain Badiou's notion of political subjectivity. In contrast to the poststructuralist (post-)subject to which we have become accustomed in the theoretical humanities during the past few decades, this political subject is indifferent to (phenomenal) differences, including those that contemporary discourse links to the problematic of sexuality. In the final analysis, psychoanalysis is incompatible with the poststructuralist differentialism that informs Edelman's misleading interpretation of it.

We've already considered how Edelman's argument insists on the particularity of the subject of the unconscious. To support this view, Edelman incorporates into his discussion an extended quote from Lacan's relatively well-known seminar on ethics. As he does elsewhere in his teaching, Lacan in this seminar links his concept of the subject to an idea of truth. In the passage Edelman extracts for *No Future*, Lacan associates this truth with the term *Wunsch*, which Freud uses to describe the unconscious wish that dreams, for instance, serve at once to express and to disguise.

Lacan's general point in the passage of interest to Edelman is this: The *Wunsch* is immune to the moral judgments imposed by the socially mediated ego. This ego upholds the Freudian 'civilized sexual morality' that the subject will interiorize through the agency of its particular social identifications. This is why Lacan qualifies the Freudian wish as "irreducible," obeying not a "universal," but rather "the most particular of laws."<sup>6</sup> In *No Future*, Edelman takes Lacan's pronouncement to imply that this "stubborn particularity" in the subject – there's no question that Lacan on one level emphasizes the *Wunsch*'s "abnormal" idiosyncrasy – "voids every notion of a general good," in fact qualifying any reference to a "positive social value" as unjustified and unjustifiable (6).

To the detriment of his argument, however, Edelman leaves the rest of the quoted passage from Lacan's seminar without comment. Although the *Wunsch*, Lacan continues, follows a particular law reflecting the ego of an individual subject, he insists that it is "universal" nonetheless. Why? For the straightforward reason that "this particularity is to be found in every human being" (24). The logical flaw in Edelman's discussion lies in his undialectical assumption that an assertion of particularity automatically negates the validity of all constructions of universality. In other words, the category of the universal for Edelman must convey a positive predicate that applies to all the objects to which this category aspires to refer. By contrast, the quotation from Lacan reveals that the psychoanalyst has put into operation a different, properly negative, concept of universality, one which grounds, so to speak, the concept of the subject with the premise that all particular subjects share the same estrangement from themselves – an opaque, compromised access to their own desires. What is universal in subjectivity is that all subjects have in common the fact that they have mistakenly taken themselves to correspond fully with the markers of social identity with which they have chosen to affiliate.

There's a precise correspondence here with Badiou's concept of the subject as it relates to politics. In error, we map our subjectivities in accordance with the reference points of the hegemonic social values in circulation in a given situation of discourse. At any moment, however, an event can happen that will address itself to us not as individuals – individuals with this or that 'sexuality', for example – but rather as particular incarnations of a generic humanity. This event calls us to rerecognize ourselves, as it were, or perhaps to *derecognize* ourselves, as participants in the elaboration of the consequences of an evanescent truth. If we allow it, if we can overcome our resistance to it, this truth – the truth of Freud's unconscious *Wunsch*, the truth

of Badiou's political event – will radically transform the way we perceive our relation to the social world.

### **Immortal**

The temporal dialectic that emerges out of psychoanalysis, and which we can now relate to Badiou's doctrine of the idea, contrasts sharply with the distinction we find in Edelman's work between an investment in the future and its nihilistic negation. The psychoanalytic position, initially developed by Freud, distinguishes rather between the finitude of ontogenetic or individual life – in other words, the 'natural' cycle of life and death – and the phylogenetic or infinite immortality of what, at psychoanalysis's suggestion, we might call humanity's inhuman essence.

In simpler language, I refer here to the deathly persistence of life beyond the limits of (biological) life itself. Significantly, this irreducible dimension of human life beyond the Freudian pleasure principle is also presented by psychoanalysis as a *generic* attribute, one which straddles the otherwise unbridgeable chasm of sexual difference. Subjects on both sides of the sexuation divide are *equally* in excess of a merely animal self-preservative 'instinct', which fails to stop the living being from being capable of existing not for an ideal, but rather for an *idea*.

I want to argue in this second part that in its most valuable and provocative moments, queer theory discourse has tried to suggest an understanding of queerness that closely resembles this psychoanalytic-Badiouian thesis about a generic and immanent human immortality. Edelman's work represents one significant attempt to link what psychoanalysis understands by the death drive to the queer problematic. The problem, however, is that far from suggesting what Edelman elaborates under the "no future" banner, the death drive introduces a realm we can

describe in precisely opposite terms. Beyond Freud's pleasure principle, in other words, there lies not the nihilistic negation of any better future for humanity whatsoever, but rather the emancipatory affirmation of humanity's excess over itself, an excess that is properly *eternal* in nature. If there's no future, in other words, it's because this future is not merely already (potentially) here, but also always has been, and always will be.

Before further developing this idea, allow me to open a general parenthesis on Badiou for those readers unfamiliar with his work. The relatively recent and seemingly improbable ascendancy of interest in Badiou in Anglophone academic circles – secondary works and especially translations have now appeared in unprecedented number and with accelerating speed – is surely not unrelated to the remarkable clarity and single-mindedness with which he mercilessly denounces the traitorous compromises and shameful rationalisations of so much contemporary thought. Badiou accomplishes this feat by developing an ambitious and breathtakingly original alternative to the endlessly recycled poststructuralist theoretical commonplaces of the past three or four decades, which seem to become all the more familiar and predictable the more emphatically a 'post-' to poststructuralism is proclaimed. Because of hegemonic queer theory's impeccable poststructuralist credentials, the intriguing possibility presents itself to read Badiou's work as a critique of queer discourse's most deep-seated assumptions.<sup>7</sup>

And yet, Badiou's philosophy amounts to more than a mere reaction to poststructuralist clichés. Indeed, it polemicizes against what it seems to understand as a mostly German or Frankfurt notion of critique for offering no positive alternative. Systematically, Badiou subverts all the dominant motifs of late twentieth-century cultural theory: the all-encompassing text is ruptured by the unforeseeable event; the thick historicity of genealogical temporality (not to

mention the queer-nihilist negation of any and all futurity) is halted by immanent emanations of the eternal; the heterogeneous relativism of an infinity of cultural systems is thrust aside as a self-evident banality in favour of politicised sameness and universality; the post-epistemological assault on knowledge succumbs to the heroic counterattack of truth; and the omnipresent discursive or social construction of reality is supplanted by a seemingly preposterous *mathematical* ontology. No, Badiou retorts to those irrational Heideggerians and their mystical cult of the pre-Socratics: to come closer to being you must read Plato and Georg Cantor; learn about the immanentisation of infinity, not to mention the mathematically revolutionary invention of transfinite numbers and set theory.

Badiou's mathematical ontology, together with the formal logical language he elaborates in the view of founding a radically non-subjective study of the realm of appearances – a phenomenology, in that precise sense – calls into question the relation of his project to psychoanalysis, and more specifically to Lacanian psychoanalysis. This remains the case despite two facts: first, that Badiou will routinely, and quite performatively, name Lacan as one of his 'masters'; and second, that Lacan himself invokes the language of mathematics, although not without ambivalence, as the 'ideal' for his own intervention into the fraught legacy of Freud. At any rate, the valorisation of logical and mathematic 'language' in both Badiou and Lacan puts welcome pressure on the virtually universal queer assumption concerning the embeddedness of sexuality in language or discourse – that is, in the construction and deconstruction of meaning.

Both the poststructuralist discourse on language, and the language of 'discourse' in Foucault's sense of the term, commit two mortal sins for Badiou, pun fully intended. First, they privilege the realms of language-signification (*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*: Derrida) and discourse-power (biopolitics) over the disruptive and exceptional event. Not only does the event break

radically with both language and discourse in these precise senses; also, the event, potentially, grants us properly subjective access to a truth both eternal and universal in its address.

Second, poststructuralist language-discourse has the perhaps counterintuitive tendency to reduce the human being to ‘life’, a life which must remain ignorant of the immortal excess that defines humanity for Badiou, as it does for psychoanalysis. This excess is what makes the human being capable of *persevering* through an act of faith in the invigorating promise of an idea. To be sure, this perseverance can persist beyond the limit that defends the value of self-preservation. The essence, as it were, of humanity is therefore not its merely animal attributes – its various physiological and sexual needs; its physical and psychological vulnerabilities; its subjection to the laws of nature – but rather a properly immortal supplement, which life itself can’t account for. In other words, a human life is fully capable of holding on to forms of being that don’t register in life’s own terms. In this way, Badiou’s thought affirms a subjectivity that can cling to their truth and trace their points of consequence more than it clings, as one says, to life itself.

This idea of an immortal essence in the human by which the human can immanently transcend itself is hardly new. Badiou traces it to Plato’s eternal ideas. But it also, very conspicuously, characterises numerous religious traditions, including of course Christianity. Badiou’s discourse on immortality can helpfully be read as a materialist and explicitly atheist (as opposed to secular) reinterpretation of theological discourses about eternal life. For example, Pascal, an important reference for Badiou, developed the idea that one can be reborn in faith for all eternity in the here-and-now; that resurrection is something that happens before you die. Although the Christian motif of rebirth has been appropriated by conservative and fundamentalist sects which function more or less as profit-driven corporations, the idea is surely too valuable to abandon to the reactionaries. Indeed, the transformative experience of

resubjectivation developed in Badiou's philosophy teaches precisely the same lesson taught by the subtractive, de-individuating, and incorporative message articulated by Paul in the earliest days of Christianity. Lacan, too, oriented his teaching around an idea of the subjectivating effects of an inhuman, transpersonal cause (*la cause freudienne*), effectively inviting his followers to devote their lives to it.

In the psychoanalytic literature, the most consequential meditation on the mutually imbricated, and therefore uncanny, complexities of life and death is surely *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), mentioned already in the first section of this essay. In his complex and shifty text, Freud makes a heroic attempt to come to terms with this immortal and inhuman essence of humanity. Two years after the end of the Great War's unspeakable carnage, the psyche's insistent revisitation of unpleasurable experiences had become all too evident to anyone involved with the care of returning military personnel. Traumatic neurosis, but also and primarily the transference neuroses, and then finally primary masochism and its conversion to sadism, all convinced Freud that the pleasure reference will never suffice to define the human subject. Enlisted for the organism's self-preservation, what Freud called ego libido runs up against an object-oriented drive. This latter variety of libido is the one which, for Freud, compels the organism onto the terrain of what we commonly understand as sexuality. As we know, this sexuality can result in reproduction, but also, not uncommonly in the broadest historical and epidemiological terms, in death. At the heart of life, then, Freud discovers the antinomy of individual life and species life: sexual reproduction – that is, species immortality – comes at the cost of the individual organism's longevity. This remains the case across the broadest range of natural or biological life to which Freud, on this level at least, considered humanity to belong.

The life and death antinomy in Freud's text is informed by the work of late nineteenth-century German evolutionary biologist August Weismann. It was Weismann who argued that living substance is divided on the cellular level between a mortal soma (body) and an immortal 'germ-plasm'. Clearly, Freud saw a connection to his own distinction between death instincts and life instincts. In the end, however, Freud breaks from Weismann's thesis. He couldn't agree with the biologist's contention that since unicellular organisms, innocent of the soma/germ-plasm split, must be immortal, death comes late onto the scene of evolutionary history, and is therefore not inherent in life as such.

Like his theories of sexuality and sexual difference, then, Freud's theory of the death instinct is explicitly offered as an alternative to the properly biological understandings available to early twentieth-century science. This remains the case despite the complicating fact that Freud also expressed hope that a biological explanation for the death instinct might one day be discovered. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* struggles towards the conclusion that the paradoxically deathly immortal kernel of humanity is disjoined from any biological or evolutionary function. Viewed as the traumatic insistence of senseless *jouissance*, of the body's ceaseless bombardment of the mind with (representations of) an excessive and purposeless libidinal excitation, death not only inheres in life *as such*, but also defiantly resists rendering as a horizon of meaning of any moral, evolutionary, or even biological kind.

Lacan draws attention to these paradoxes of Freud's discourse on death in the same Rome Discourse I referred to earlier. In this *écrit*, Lacan further develops Freud's pioneering psychoanalytic commentary on the definition of life in biological science. Specifically, Lacan elaborates on the notion that life and death entertain what he calls a "polar relation" – a relation

of interdependency, that is – in the very midst of biological phenomena which, historically, have been understood rather to *distinguish* life from death.<sup>8</sup>

To support this idea, Lacan refers to the origin of modern biology in the late eighteenth-century work of Marie-François-Xavier Bichat (1771-1802). Quite simply, Bichat defined life as the set of vital forces that resist death. Hardly unlike Freud with his idea of *Eros*, Harvard physiologist Walter Bradford Cannon (1871-1945) refined this definition in the early 1930s by associating life with the principle of homeostasis, which he viewed as a general vital function in the organism that regulates its own physiological equilibrium. Lacan takes these examples from classical biology and physiology to support an explicitly dialectical understanding according to which life can't be conceived without positing an opposing force that tries to thwart it. Referencing Heidegger, Lacan qualifies this deathly force as “a possibility” which is “absolutely proper, unconditional, unsurpassable, certain, and as such indeterminate [*indéterminée*]” for the subject defined in its historicity. Lacan summarises his point by describing Freud's death “instinct” as “the limit of the historical function of the subject” (261-2).

It's clear that Lacan enlists these authorities in the biological and physiological sciences to buttress Freud's basic notion about duelling forces of life and death in the human organism. However, he adds a crucial distinction. Modern science situates death's resistance to life in the biologically conceived organism itself, defining this resistance as a disruptive counterprinciple weaved into the very fibre of humanity's natural being. To develop an alternative psychoanalytic approach to the problem, Lacan returns to Freud's concept of repetition. For Lacan, death isn't a properly biological function of the organism. Rather, death, with its associated *pulsion* (*Trieb*, drive), is a consequence of the living being's subjection to language, to the signifier. When he plays that famous game with the cotton reel, working through the mother's traumatic absence

with the help of a primordial and binary signifying structure (*fort-da*), the Freudian infant gains a modicum of mastery over nature by “murdering the thing” (319). Also, he commits his destiny to the workings of a symbolic order that will forever exceed the limitations of his conscious knowledge.

Already by 1953, Lacan had recognised in the subject’s subjection to the signifier something he called the “eternalization” (319) of this subject’s desire. In choosing this word, Lacan didn’t wish merely to qualify desire as incessant and inexhaustible, although it certainly possesses both of these qualities. More radically, he meant to say that desire, on the level of what he calls its real, immanently lifts the subject out from the constraints of life; separates this subject from the chronological and teleological historicity of human time. For Lacan, desire accomplishes this not by negating the future, as Edelman would have it, but rather by affirming a sort of background or underground non-temporality – eternity, in other words. In this way, Lacan introduces a crucial distinction between phenomenal time – not just chronological time, but also lived time, Bergsonian *durée* – and the non-time of desire’s real. As Freud said about negation, time doesn’t exist in the unconscious. But Lacan goes even further. Our apparent enslavement to the signifier, in other words the signifier’s deathly traversal of human biological life, emancipates us from the Other’s – the master’s – desire. This is so because the master’s menace of death will fall on deaf ears in the being who chooses to “enjoy the fruits of its servitude” (320).

It’s perhaps in this decidedly Hegelian mode that Lacan’s discourse, unexpectedly perhaps, approaches most suggestively Badiou’s concept of immortality. Desire in its most radical form, the real of desire that delivers us onto the threshold of the drive, discloses that ‘life’ in all it implies by way of compromise, accommodation, conformity, adaptation, equilibrium,

reconciliation, isn't everything. It's *not-all*, we could say, in reference to the logic of feminine being. In this context, the master is the subject who defines and upholds the terms of life; separates what can legitimately be lived from what is condemned to deathly nonexistence; closes off the possibilities for legitimate and recognizable being by demarcating an excluded no-go zone. Lacan's Hegelian message is that the master's definition of life is binding only for the subject who fails, as it were, to read between the lines. Despite what it incessantly tells you, life need neither be swallowed whole, nor taken on its own terms. As long as you aren't put off by its deathly look, there most decidedly *is* 'more to life than this'.

Despite the considerable differences that distinguish their discourses, Lacan and Badiou both aim to subvert the understanding that limits what we view life to be to the level of the ordinary or the everyday. This is the familiar understanding that considers life the stuff of unexceptional, workaday experience, governed by the logic of what merely appears. Such a life is necessarily complicit with the varieties of production that can only reproduce the status quo. At a variety of points in their work, both thinkers distinguish where they locate their privileged concepts – the real for Lacan, being and the event for Badiou – from the dimensions of opinion, commerce, representation, ideology, spectacle, or even politics understood as a popular or consensual good.

Both thinkers have been similarly reproached for nurturing a sort of neo-aristocratic ideal of heroic exceptionalism. Terry Eagleton, for example, has sceptically quipped that Badiou's idea of love refers to an event that can only happen on the romantic (if expensive) streets of Paris.<sup>9</sup> Yet, in their respective idioms, Lacan and Badiou insist that the privileged realm they seek to define is accessed neither through some humanistic or intentional exercise of will, nor

through some gesture of sacrifice, abnegation, or renunciation. Most crucially, access to the ethical realm requires no specific qualities of status, personhood, or subjectivity.

To be sure, the ‘point by point’ development of the consequences of a truth in Badiou, or else the refusal to give way on one’s desire in Lacan, necessitate something like work or effort, something other than pure abandonment to a will or power in the realm of alterity. But, on another level, the event as such, or the (missed) encounter with the real, simply *happen*: their occurrence is on one level utterly indifferent to what this or that person might make of them. Indeed, Lacan and Badiou share the antihumanist view that when it comes to what should be done – ethics, that is – remaining open to the encounter with the real, or the maintenance of fidelity to a truth, have the effect of wrenching oneself from oneself, of subverting personhood and identity by subtracting the subjective function from its circumscription by what partakes, ideologically, of meaning or sense.

The subject is therefore a privileged category for both Lacan and Badiou. This subject is neither the humanist subject of intentional consciousness, nor the liberal subject of rational self-interest. Lacan’s subject is of course the subject of the unconscious; a subject disjoined from knowledge and re/presentation. Rigorously, that the Lacanian subject is “what a signifier represents for another signifier” can be derived analytically from Lacan’s elementary definition of the signifier.<sup>10</sup> Badiou deduces his subject from that feature of the human being that is capable of remaining faithful to a procedure of truth. Individual selfhood – including in particular the attachment to what Freud, after British anthropologist Ernest Crawley, called the “narcissism of small differences”<sup>11</sup> – is precisely what blocks us from the kind of authentic subjectivation to which both psychoanalysis and Badiou’s philosophy aspire. Lacan’s Antigone embraces death as an escape from an intolerable world that forbids her from acknowledging her brother’s fate.

Badiou's subject, transported by passion for a scientific, political, artistic, or amorous idea, pursues that idea in a way that grants emancipation from the constraints and compromises of worldly self-interest.

The human condition presents us – individually, as it were – with a choice in regard to which we don't have the luxury of remaining indifferent, sitting on the fence. Essentially, we must choose not between life and death, but rather between life and *immortality*. Agnosticism is mere self-deception. Life means existence on the level of the ordinary functioning of sociosymbolic relations, or the mundane and opinion-based democratic negotiation of antagonistic sets of interests. In other words, life is accommodation and conformity. By contrast, immortality requires a partisan commitment to pursue desire to the point where the law becomes suspended; to remain faithful to the real of the Idea and the transformative consequences it presents to the world in which it intervenes. But if the choice before us is between life and immortality, what becomes of death?

The death drive is deathly, destructive, pathological, only for the neurotic subject of psychoanalysis and the reactive subject of Badiou's philosophy. These are the pseudo-subjects who resist – set up defences against – the encounter with *jouissance*, with the real of the event in any of its manifestations. It's only from the defensive, ego-predicated perspective of life – this term, even more than 'democracy', is perhaps the most ideologically loaded term of the day – that death appears as the end, as the limit beyond which there might be, but maybe not, another, better world.

In truth, death needn't be the end. It needn't cause us to proclaim, with confident nihilism, that there's no future. Rather, death is the name of the infinity of immanent gateways

that open up onto the threshold of an always-present arena of immortality open to everyone, without exception, on the other side of the queer horizon's ambivalent and exhausted impasse.

**James Penney** is the author of three books: *After Queer Theory: The Limits of Sexual Politics* (2014), *The Structures of Love: Art and Politics beyond the Transference* (2012), and *The World of Perversion: Psychoanalysis and the Impossible Absolute of Desire* (2006). He teaches in the Cultural Studies and Modern Language and Literature (French) Departments at Trent University.

## Notes

This essay is a revised excerpt from my *After Queer Theory: The Limits of Sexual Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2014).

<sup>1</sup> Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 2. Further references are incorporated into the text. For Bersani's influence, see most significantly *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); and *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). I address Bersani's relation to Freudian psychoanalysis and to queer theory in "Reading Freud: Bersani and Lacan," *Leo Bersani: Queer Theory and Beyond*, ed. Mikko Tuhkanen (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Žižek's key book *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000) did much to broaden the readership of these French authors in the English-speaking world.

<sup>3</sup> Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psycho-Analysis," *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (London: Norton, 2004), pp. 197–268.

<sup>4</sup> Lacan, "Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty," *Écrits*, pp. 161–75.

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell comments critically on Engels' classic *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* in her own classic text, originally published in *New Left Review* in 1966 and available in reworked form in *Women: The Longest Revolution* (London: Virago, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Edelman quotes from Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (London: Norton, 1992), p. 24. Further references are incorporated into the text.

<sup>7</sup> See the "Preface" of Badiou's *Logics of Worlds* (London: Continuum, 2009) for a concise presentation of his critique of what he calls "democratic materialism."

<sup>8</sup> Lacan, "Function and Field," *Écrits*, p. 261. Further references are incorporated into the text.

<sup>9</sup> Eagleton, "Subjects and Truths," *New Left Review* 9 (May–June 2001).

<sup>10</sup> The signifier is “that which represents a subject for another signifier.” Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (London: Norton, 1998), p. 207.

<sup>11</sup> See Freud, “The Taboo of Virginity” (1918), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (SE)*, trans. James and Alix Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute for Psycho-Analysis, 1953-74), vol. 11, pp. 191-208.