The Pleasures of the Slave

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On reflection, it may not seem surprising that masochism has offered itself as both a site for the worst of chauvinist fantasies and a literally perverse space for figuring politically—even in feminist terms—a pleasure beyond prescription. Masochism presents a theoretical challenge to feminist politics because of its apparent relish of subservience in place of an abhorrence of oppression. The social—in the form of a political diagnostics and a program for "cure"—comes up against a recalcitrant psychical—in the form of a seemingly pathological desire.

Psychoanalysis, as another form of the social, has diagnosed feminine desire in general as a resistant kind of psychical; this has also been understood pathologically. Perhaps this collusion against desire, in the political and the clinical, could give us pause. I want to concentrate my focus not on masochism as the actions of the pervert but on masochism as the pleasures of the slave because I am interested in the possibility of its paradox. That paradox is, as Laplanche and Pontalis would have it, the one that also interested Freud—that there is "a state of affairs that lies at the root of the masochistic perversion and that is also to be found in moral masochism: the fact of sexual pleasure being bound to pain" (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973, p. 245).

The fact of pleasure in pain is not at all easy to account for on an "economic" model of pleasure. This causes Freud to write of the economic problem of masochism. If pleasure can be bound to pain, then it would seem that the two cannot be antithetical in the straightforward sense that the pleasure principle surmises. This in itself might make masochistic pleasure stand out, theoretically, as a psychical feature with a story to tell.

This represents a difficulty for a theory that posits pleasure as the basis of the interaction between the psychical and the social, as psychoanalysis does.
The "pleasure principle" underlies all desire, and the whole burden of the Oedipus complex is that desire is channeled into the social formation only on the threat of the loss of that pleasure, that is, castration.

It also represents a problem for a political analysis structured around a repudiation of pain, which primary demand underpins feminism in its call for an end to the subordination of women. It is not merely on conceptual grounds of justice that the call to equality has force. It is on the basis that inequality causes pain and that this is not ethically justifiable in a just society.

The masochist position, then, is a theoretical challenge to both feminism and psychoanalysis. In this chapter, I glance at differing treatments of masochism made by Jessica Benjamin and Gilles Deleuze before considering Freud's own account of a masochistic fantasy in "A Child Is Being Beaten," with the help of Laplanche and Pontalis's analysis of fantasy in psychoanalysis.

Benjamin makes an explicit claim to "going between" psychoanalysis and feminism in her introduction to Like Subjects Love Objects (1995). But, despite this, I sketch an argument for why I suspect "she can't get there from here." I go on to argue that the French reading of Freud is more fruitful because it allows one to address the problematic of going between the psychological and the social not just as the relation between subject and other but as raising the question of the ontology of thought in a (feminist) theory of the subject.

In analyses of masochism, the masochist's mechanism of satisfaction is usually analyzed as one in which intrapsychical states are projected into the intersubjective realm. In some sense, then, the pleasure of the slave may be said itself to go between the psyche and the social, although perhaps not in the way in which our subject envisages.

In The Bonds of Love (1988), Jessica Benjamin considers masochism and feminine desire for submission through the example of The Story of O. The story is considered as a report of a desire—not as a fantasy, nor yet as a text—because Benjamin is interested in considering masochistic desire for what it suggests about domination and submission. And this, she argues, is a real world configuration that conflates self and other with the gender polarity, having its origins in both the individual's history and the social practice of being mothered.

In this, perhaps, she might be thought to be more feminist than psychoanalytic. Certainly, the analysis she provides of the desire is exclusively in terms of power relations between subjects (pleasure is not the point), simplifying any intrapsychical dynamic to an implicitly Hegelian model of self-consciousness. In effect, this means her analysis of the self/other relation is of the other as ideally "an equivalent center of consciousness." The uncanny other, the unconscious and, indeed, sexuality, is functionally absent:
This reversible complementarity [of active and passive positions] is the basic pattern of domination, and it is set in motion by the denial of recognition to the original other, the mother who is reduced to object. The resulting structure of subject and object (gender polarity) thoroughly permeates our social relations, our ways of knowing, our efforts to transform and control the world; and it is this gendered logic which ultimately forecloses on the intersubjective realm—that space in which the mutual recognition of subjects can compete with the reversible relationship of domination. (Benjamin, 1988, p. 220)

Benjamin’s view of sadomasochism, then, is a dialectical one, as is her “solution” to the problem of domination. It proposes not to deal with the pleasure of the slave on its own terms, but assumes that if the self was configured “ideally” this pleasure would be replaced by another, that of mutual recognition.

If the “mutual recognition of subjects” can compete with the “reversible relationship of domination,” it is because of the common conceptual paradox that produces them: the other is, and is more than, my object, and I must be his to be myself. Thus, “the mutual recognition of subjects” is not as benign or as resolved a posture as it might at first seem, since it entails the maintenance of a continuing tension of ambivalence.

Hegel describes that tension in The Phenomenology of Spirit as having an ontological significance: “But the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation. . . . Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being” (1977, p. 19). And in her later book Like Subjects Love Objects, Benjamin embraces this dialectical approach as psychoanalytic practice:

This necessity of grasping the negative moment is something that I have tried to emphasize more clearly in these essays [i.e., than in The Bonds of Love]. However, the basic formal logic of my argument remains essentially the same as in my earlier work: reintegrating the excluded, negative moment to create a sustained tension rather than an opposition. This logic holds whether we are talking about the relation between self and other that the ideal of masculine rationality and autonomy have excluded, or about the necessity of destruction that the ideal of recognition might exclude. But whereas this logic replicates certain moves elaborated in deconstruction—reversing and elevating the negated element in an opposition—the practice of psychoanalysis pushes toward something rather different. The lost possibilities of theory have to lead us toward a reconstruction of what we encounter in practice. (1995, p. 23–24)

This “reconstruction” is not a “deconstruction,” but not just for the distinction that Benjamin spells out. The process described, of “reversing and elevating the negated element in an opposition,” is not the same conceptual procedure as Derrida advocates as deconstruction in “Signature Event Context” in Margins of Philosophy: “Deconstruction cannot limit itself or proceed
immediately to a neutralization: it must, by means of a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, practice an overturning of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system” (1982, p. 329).

Benjamin’s procedure does not displace the comfort of the two terms in their mutual conceptual dependence. Indeed, it is an important difference between dialectics and deconstruction that there not be a recuperation of the difference, an “elevation,” between terms at a second order. The idea of a “second order” installs a hierarchy that deconstruction, far from utilizing, tends to dissipate. So, in Derrida’s terms, and according to his analysis of Hegel in, for example, “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve,” one could say that this reconstruction is too profitable for psychoanalysis to amount to a deconstruction. In the idea of a “mutual recognition,” Benjamin recoups a difference rendered in the currency of adequation. The return is “with interest,” since what was given away in entertaining ambivalence or tension at all, is gathered in again in the comforting possibility of an exchange.

The difference between deconstruction and reconstruction would become clearer still in relation to Derrida’s discussion of Aporias. The aporia is not a negative or opposing idea but the collapse of meaning in an idea. The concept of intersubjectivity is no doubt itself subject to an “aporia” in Derrida’s sense—“intersubjective” being not a triumphal discovery of new meaning behind the ambivalence of the subject and its other; on the contrary, intersubjectivity would be haunted by the experience of an uncertainty, a radical loss of confidence in their meeting.

The omission of pleasure from Benjamin’s analysis of masochism, despite its model being found in a pornographic narrative and the absence of sexuality in general from the account, performs a worrying elevation of its own. Rather than going between the psychical and the social, it may take masochism away from the psychical and into the social—there to cauterize its desire?

Against the dialectical reading of masochism offered by Benjamin, in which the meaning of masochism is the duality of dominance and submission, Deleuze suggests in Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty that sadism and masochism appear symmetrical, not because they are true poles of each other but because of their signifying habit of transferring the intrapsychical onto the intersubjective. In the case of masochism, the critical has something to teach the clinical about the nature of the sign. “In place of a dialectic which all too readily perceives the link between opposites, we should aim for a critical and clinical appraisal able to reveal the truly differential mechanisms as well as the artistic originalities” (Deleuze, 1989, p. 14; cf. Deleuze, 1997). “Because the judgment of the clinician is prejudiced, we must take an entirely different approach, the literary approach . . . symptomatology is always a question of art” (Deleuze, 1989, p. 14).
The problem for an appeal to the political realities of domination versus recognition such as Benjamin makes is that it forecloses the intricate question of what is real. In fact, Sade's and Masoch's fantasies raise the very issue of the reality of the sign, and here social and psychological theory need the aesthetic to properly appreciate the ontology at work in them.

The problem is not so much that the masochist desires to be dominated, but that the desire for mutual recognition, no less than the desire to be dominated, takes place in thought. Within the medium of thought and fantasy, a masochist folie-à-deux or a feminist “mass psychosis” are ontologically equivalent, and it becomes a question only of how alone one is in one's fantasy (which is to say, in one's pleasure).

The feminist problem is that both pleasures—the pleasure of political correctness and the pleasure of the slave—happen "between" the psychic and the social and by an apparently unspecified mechanism. This is a problem, too, for a psychoanalysis that prescribes on the side of the social, such as Benjamin's view, which, however commendable, has effaced the psychic by attempting to "correct" unconscious desire. In general, a univocity of pleasure fails to capture the masochistic irony of pleasure in pain.

Laplanche and Pontalis argue that in Freud's theory, "the status of fantasy cannot be found within the framework of the opposition reality-illusion (imaginary). The notion of psychical reality introduces a third category, that of structure" (Burgin, Donald, & Kaplan, 1986, p. 27). It is necessary to identify the structure of this "going between," then, so as to avoid an ontological collapse into the opposition of real and imaginary. And this is the "literary" task that Deleuze sets psychoanalysis through Venus in Furs.

Venus in Furs is the story of a sexual relation in which it appears the feminine is dominant. But, despite the infamous contract ("you will renounce your identity completely," etc.) in which Severin abrogates all rights to life and identity to his Venus, it is, in fact, a production "from the bottom up":

In projecting the superego onto the beating woman, the masochist appears to externalize it merely in order to emphasize its derisory nature and make it serve the ends of the triumphant ego. One could say almost the opposite of the sadist: he has a powerful and overwhelming superego, and nothing else. The sadist's superego is so strong that he has become identified with it; he is his own superego and can only find an ego in the external world. (Deleuze, 1989, p. 124)

Deleuze observes: "The masochistic ego is only apparently crushed by the superego. . . . The weakness of the ego is a strategy by which the masochist manipulates the woman into the ideal state for the performance of the role he has assigned to her" (1989, p. 124).

The masochistic fantasies of Venus in Furs can only be understood as tableaux; there is not so much the literality of a subject-to-subject relation
depicted, but a *mis-en-scène* in which each element is to be considered as both related and as strangely autonomous. Freud adopted the same “rhebus” method for reading the dream. And he reads fantasy according to its textual-ity in the essay on “A Child Is Being Beaten,” which is helpful in thinking through this underlying paradox that is ontological and might be attributed to thought itself.

In their glossary of psychoanalysis, Laplanche and Pontalis note: “The idea of a masochism that cannot be adequately explained as a turning round of sadism against the self was only accepted by Freud once he had put forward the hypothesis of the death instinct” (1973, p. 245). Freud’s essay appears in 1919, that is, in the same year as the paper on “The Uncanny” and just prior to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which the death drive is explicitly proposed. The prospect of a masochistic pleasure separate from sadism could now be imagined.

Both “A Child Is Being Beaten” and “The Uncanny” show Freud at his own uncanny pleasure of attending to the unconscious. The fantasy that “a child is being beaten” is a common masochistic fantasy reported by women in analysis with Freud, and his examination of it neither pathologizes their desire—“Very probably there are still more frequent instances of it among the far greater number of people who have not been obliged to come to analysis by manifest illness” (Freud, 1919, p. 179)—nor denies their pleasure in it. On the contrary, his analysis is spent accounting for the complicated “reality” to which the fantasy refers.

The fantasy is first reported as one from early school days, often aided by “morally masochistic” children’s literature such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*: “The child began to compete with these works of fiction by producing his own phantasies and by constructing a wealth of situations and institutions, in which children were beaten, or were punished and disciplined in some way, because of their naughtiness and bad behavior” (Freud, 1919, p. 180). The fantasy concludes with “an act of pleasurable auto-erotic satisfaction,” although witnessing actual corporal punishment at school did not bring the same pleasure to the fantasists.

Analysis brings to light that “the little girl’s beating phantasy passes through three phases, of which the first and third are consciously remembered, the middle one remaining unconscious” (Freud, 1919, p. 196). The first phase is built on sibling rivalry—beatings are desired for a sibling or other child, to prove that this child is not as loved as she; the textual motif is “*my father is beating the child whom I hate.*” It is the second, unconscious phase, in which the child herself is beaten by her father, which carries with it “the libidinal charge and the sense of guilt”: “*I am being beaten by my father.*”

In the third phase—the tableaux remembered from schooldays—the fantasy has changed again so that “it is almost invariably only boys who are being beaten. The person who does the beating is from the first her father, re-
placed later on by a substitute taken from the class of fathers.” A child is being beaten (on its naked bottom) (Freud, 1919, p. 196).

Freud, therefore, has the girl-child rereading the earlier pleasure in the fantasy of “a child is being beaten” by force of the Oedipus complex—the desire for the father and the subsequent penis envy. But, although I have called attention to the feminine nature of this fantasy, its gendered character leads to the question under discussion only through a more general observation; that the fantasy is revised through the vicissitudes of the drive—in her case reversals of aim and object that bring about femininity only imperfectly. The bodily pleasure of the masochistic tableau reflects what one can justly call a “history of ideas.”

This history makes of desire something outside biologically determined or socially conditioned “stages of development.” Curiously, it is sexuality that becomes a truly psychical construct on this view, being the origin of fantasy itself and thereby of thought. Laplanche and Pontalis, in their essay “Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality,” make this point about sexual fantasy, that in finding its pleasure in a succession of objects and aims, it enters into the psychical from the outset: “The origin of fantasy cannot be isolated from the origin of the drive itself . . . sexuality is detached from any natural object and is handed over to fantasy, and, by this very fact, starts existing as sexuality” (Burgin, Donald, & Kaplan, 1986, pp. 27–28). Sexuality is reread as thought.

Autoerotic pleasure functions in this account as an important indicator of the change—the Freudian concept of the experience of satisfaction is reinterpreted, they say, not as a stage of evolution of the drive but, instead, as the moment that repeats the disjunction of sexual desire and nonsexual functions. The emergence of desire from the satisfaction of bodily need to which it originally attached is the formation of fantasy; that is, it is the inauguration of the feeling of satisfaction to be found in the image itself. Thereafter, sexual pleasure is evidence of thought as much as of discharge, of mental as well as bodily processes.

Masochism is thereby the exemplary case of sexuality, which by its very mechanism of satisfaction—the “slipping” in object and aim of satisfaction—calls up the problem of the ontology of thought. The layers of the “child is being beaten” fantasy illustrate the Freudian conception of a passage of the drive toward satisfaction through the field of mental representations.

Benjamin adopts the concept of “intersubjectivity,” an aspect that she claims is underemphasized on the Freudian “intrapsychical” view, from an Anglophone tradition of psychoanalysis. Jacques Lacan, too, uses a Hegelian motif in his understanding of the subject. And the dehiscence in intrapsychical relations, such a feature of the perversions of masochism and sadism, is analyzed by Lacanian psychoanalysis, too, as a general property of self-consciousness. Ambivalence in the psychical, in which an internal relation to oneself is
experienced as so intensely contradictory that it must be lived outside the body in the figure of someone else, breaks apart completely only in pathological states but emerges as the ontological tendency of subjectivity itself.

The difference in Lacanian theory is that in contrast to the “intersubjective,” which opens a space for mutual recognition and therefore relates the psychical to the social on Benjamin’s theory, the “symbolic” of the Lacanian reading is more like a membrane by which one is grafted onto the other. On this view, there is no need to seek a “synthesis” of intrapsychical and intersubjective theories, as Benjamin calls for, to bring the psychoanalytic accounts of the psyche and the social together. The psyche is in the social from its first formation in the symbolic register. Indeed, there is no psyche without the social in which it finds its expression.

In the tradition of a French reading of Freud, language is the expedient that retrieves the subject from the extremes of Severin’s fate, this “turning inside out.” By instituting the possibility of the substitution of words for things, it brings the apparatus of definition to bear, and a separation can be instituted that is symbolized rather than literalized.

But in each subject, the crisis of this splitting is lived as a function of language in the most general sense. For Lacan, experience is the bodily pulse of the drive known as its itinerary through a world of signs. This creates the possibility that is “transference”; the drive moves through the virtual space of psychical representations, and these representations are “pieces” of an outside world, the love-objects and objects of knowledge held by the subject in his mirror-gaze.

They are, in effect, “signifiers,” affixed for moments of being to states of internal demand, and they necessarily stand for them as their approximation. They represent an adequation, and remain provisional, for the same reason that, in Freud, the image could not represent that aspect of the instinct that is purely energy or force. For Lacan, the subject, depicted as a relation of mind-image to body-force, is an ontological concept. “Being” is the potential of the drives and their mental adoptives, taken together.

This suggests a rapport between the psychical and the social, at the inception of thought, in the very formation of concepts. For example, the intellectual procedure of the “definition” appears isomorphic with the psychical operation called “repression.” This is an important but underemphasized consequence of French structuralist psychoanalysis. For the purposes of this discussion, it locates the “going between” of psychological and social theory as occurring in the context of thought as a kind of sign.

Without this aesthetic inflection, I suggest that psychoanalysis cannot meet the demands of feminism. (Whether feminism could or should meet the demands of psychoanalysis is another question of another order.) An interpretation of the “between” of the psychical and the social, which presents a disembodied yet individualized psyche in a preexisting social reality, begs the
question of the constitution of one in the other as an event. This can only result in a gender indifference, because it cannot take into analysis the gender difference as a difference arising through the body.

On the other hand, a psychoanalytic account that recalls its aesthetic underpinning can prove vital to feminist analysis. This underpinning is theoretically central to Lacan and even more crucial to the work of feminist psychoanalysts such as Kristeva. The aesthetic sensitivity allows an understanding of the relation of materiality to signification that does not oppose them. The body is then depicted in the process of being subjected to a symbolic order, yielding a concept of the visceral sensation specific to that body.

This can return us to the paradox with which I began this chapter. Through the prism of such a sensibility one might glimpse the masochist as a subject whose pleasure is also her pain. The yielding of sexual desire to the alienation of its objects in thought both brings satisfaction closer and, paradoxically, guarantees that it can never be complete. And to the extent that one can now see in pleasure the desire in thinking—however perverse, however abstracted—then, one catches an even more fleeting glimpse of a desire that lies behind her ideas, her political ideals no less than her sexual fantasies.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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