PURE FEELING: MASOCHISM IN LITERATURE
(1870-1985)

With reference to selected literary texts
from Sacher-Masoch to Duras

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Abstract

The introductory section of the thesis puts forward a view of the usefulness of the concept of masochism in studying literature, arguing that the tendency has been inadequately formulated by psychoanalytic theory. It refers to debates within gay studies, feminism, psychoanalysis and literary studies to contextualise the argument of the thesis. The first chapter analyses Freud’s key essay on masochism, ‘The Economic Problem of Masochism’ (1924) and appraises other theoretical contributions which have discussed the relation of masochism to artistic creativity. It goes on to critique the feminist view of women’s masochism as reflecting patriarchal relations, and examines Jungian perspectives which focus on the notion of an imitatio Christi. Chapter two contrasts a Christian view of suffering with that of psychoanalysis. It examines Simone Weil’s life and ideas in the light of a sublimatory or moral masochism, and looks at the ‘agonic’ thought of Unamuno.

The historical moment at which the term masochism was coined is the focus of the opening part of chapter three. Sacher-Masoch’s novel Venus in Furs is analysed, referring to Deleuze’s commentary which emphasises the death instinct. Sacher-Masoch’s untranslated novel, Die Seelenfängerin, is also discussed. Chapter four deals with Michel Leiris’s L’âge d’homme, analysing the central themes of masculinity, the risk inherent in literary creativity and the sacred element in masochistic self-exposures. The final chapter on works by Marguerite Duras examines a novella, L’homme assis dans le couloir, describing the process of reading as a form of masochistic introjection. It then looks at La douleur to focus on a masochistic, feminine rite of passage. A discussion of La maladie de la mort locates a shattered solitude within masochistic desire. The thesis concludes by
proposing a more nuanced dialogue between psychoanalysis and literature, by emphasising the importance of an exploratory women’s writing, and suggesting the need for a more consciously masochistic body politic.
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Preface

There are relatively few full-length studies on masochism in comparison with, say, hysteria. Since masochism is defined in the Freudian tradition as a sexual perversion, it is perhaps not surprising that commentaries of this kind by critics or clinicians have been few: the neuroses being, on the whole, rather more respectable, certainly not the target of the same kind of derisive treatment that masochism has tended to attract from the start. From its late 19th century formulation onwards, masochism’s status has been an uneasy one: the early part of this thesis discusses specific moments in Freud’s writing where its character is being decided, to show how complex and shifting a position it has occupied.

The unease over masochism may not be misplaced, if it is recognised, in the light of recent writings by Bersani and others, as a perverse miming of authoritarian structures. And sadomasochistic practices are still subject to criminal prosecution, as in the 1991 ‘Spanner’ case in the UK when fifteen men involved in S/M were convicted under the Offences Against the Person Act. There is an obvious link between psychoanalytic and psychiatric views of masochism as a perversion and the activities of law-enforcement agencies. Masochism’s originating text, Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*, has a subtitle offering it for the use of medical and legal practitioners. But while it could be argued, after Foucault, that discourses upon sexually deviant practices produce a knowledge that works to police them, masochism may be seen as a special case, a kind of ‘playing dead’ that renders the operations of power futile, unworkable.

In this thesis I take the opportunity of moving across three major disciplines to look at certain of masochism’s fortunes during the modern period. Two of these disciplines are essential: psychoanalysis remains, as it were, the custodian of masochism seen as a psychopathology; while literature remains at the root of the discussion in the name of a writer, Sacher-Masoch, and the literary concerns of his œuvre. A third discipline, modern theology, is needed not just because
masochism is a difficult quality to define and confine, but because of Christianity’s lasting capacity to address questions of pain and suffering. The transformative and redemptive narratives of the crucifixion find their contemporary echoes in masochistic sexual practices and literary imperatives. 

The basic operation that I follow, therefore, is to reclaim masochism for literature, and then, glancing backwards at psychoanalytic concerns, to look at masochistically saturated texts by two major twentieth-century French writers, Michel Leiris and Marguerite Duras, showing how respective themes of manhood and of femininity are differently inflected. A highly charged and crucial component of both is the movement of extreme opposition between the sacred and the profane terms which fuse in masochistic sexuality, again more usefully thought through contemporary theology than mainstream psychoanalysis.

I have crossed numerous boundaries to bring to this inquiry the terms and the language I have needed; referred to psychoanalytic and literary theory, to cultural and religious studies, and, when necessary, to philosophy and to the history of ideas. I have drawn upon these languages and these terms in order to pursue my argument and part of the reason for this lies in masochism’s mercurial, elusive quality. If the capacity to disappear, to become unfindable, is one of masochism’s ways of avoiding disciplinarian procedures, as Bersani thinks, the same capacity makes it problematic to characterise straightforwardly. I have avoided any such attempt, rather replicating masochism’s own strategic fluidity by bringing to this study a diversity of material and moving between theory, commentary and polemic, thus seeking to preclude the enclosure of masochism within a single discipline.
Introduction

These pages do not offer a contribution to sexology. They can be read as a critique of it. Studies of masochistic or sadomasochistic types and behaviour are legion, from Havelock Ellis¹ to Robert Stoller.² The flourishing of such psycho-sexual treatises over the century must owe a great deal to the uneasy pleasures of such reading, which, while excavating the darker recesses of our private lives, maintain an aura of aseptic objectivity which intensifies the sensation of being an innocent witness to deviant practices. The genre could be said to have been spawned by the first encyclopædist of the perversions, Krafft-Ebing, creator of the term ‘masochism’ and cast here as one of the villains of the piece, when I call into question the origins of psychology and psychoanalysis in an examination of the construction of this supposed perversion.

My reason for drawing attention to the foundational inadequacy of the late nineteenth century neologism ‘masochism’ is to focus on its ontological dependency on literature, emblematically embodied in the proper name of a popular late nineteenth century Austrian novelist, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. The perpetration of the act of appropriation, which reduced the name of this much-admired, much-translated author to the shorthand term for a clutch of queasy perversions, makes Krafft-Ebing truly the robber-baron of psychology’s founding years.³

How long overdue, then, is a confrontation between literature and psychology, an accounting between the two. Masochism cannot be abolished: it now occupies too

¹ Ellis, Studies in the Psychology of Sex.
³ Intentionally, I have everywhere referred to Sacher-Masoch’s full name rather than the truncated ‘Masoch’ first instigated by Krafft-Ebing, a reduction I regard as a defacement of the proper name.
prominent a place in our ways of characterising many thoughts, feelings, responses. The tremendous success of the neologism, within years of Krafft-Ebing’s coining of it, is an indication that a certain complex needed some form of identification. Masochism needs to be handled differently, neither with tongs nor with kid gloves, but with a vivid sense of its fundamental, essential nature in sexuality and in the literary imagination. In arguing that literature has priority over psychology in the creating of a masochistic imaginary, I want to clear a space for our sense of masochism to be enriched by all that the literary tradition has to offer.

However, while literature, for both writer and reader, has always been and will continue to be a matter of masochism - and fruitfully so - much of the point of this has been left unrecognised and not reflected upon. The influence of a normative psychoanalysis has restricted the field of enquiry into the masochistic imagination, denying an extraordinary wealth of literary material, excitingly and vividly present in the texts of Proust⁴ and Rousseau⁵ as well as obviously masochistic texts by Sacher-Masoch⁶ or Pauline Réage,⁷ the critical and theoretical attention it deserves. The negative naming of masochism has,

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⁴ Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*. In *Le temps retrouvé*, Marcel witnesses the following scene: ‘...là, enchaîné sur un lit comme Prométhée sur son rocher, recevant les coups d’un martinet en effet planté de clous que lui infligeait Maurice, je vis, déjà tout en sang, et couvert d’ecchymoses qui prouvaient que le supplice n’avait pas lieu pour la première fois, je vis devant moi M. de Charlus.’ (p.122) Later Marcel overhears Charlus remark of his torturer: ‘(il) est très gentil et fait de son mieux. Mais je ne le trouve pas assez brutal. Sa figure me plaît, mais il m’appelle crapule comme si c’était une leçon apprise.’ (p.124)
⁵ Rousseau, *Confessions*. In relation to a spanking by his governess, Mlle Lambercier, Rousseau recalls of his younger self: ‘...j’avais trouvé dans la douleur, dans la honte même, un mélange de sensualité qui m’avait laissé plus de désir que de crainte de l’éprouver derechef par la même main.’ (vol. 1, p.44), and later in the same vein: ‘Être aux genoux d’une maîtresse impérieuse, obéir à ses ordres, avoir des pardons à lui demander, étaient pour moi de très douces jouissances...’ (p.47).
⁶ See chapter three and bibliography for references to works by Sacher-Masoch.
⁷ Réage, *Histoire d’O*. See chapter one, part three, for a discussion of Jessica Benjamin’s commentary on the novel.
perhaps, made critics chary of handling such material, for fear of being tarred by the brush of pathology.

The loss cannot be overestimated. The importance we attribute to literature is less a measure of its theoretical or formal sophistication than its capacity to illuminate our deepest and most inscrutable difficulties and disturbances, to characterise our unaccounted agonies, to follow our fantasies into the strange nooks and crannies into which they insert themselves.

Art flourishes along these fault-lines, and reflecting or illuminating a hidden order is one of the things that literature does best. For example, reading in a Muriel Spark novel that a male character gave a man he strongly disliked a favourite gold watch reveals a paradox. One may be generous for all the wrong reasons, generosity may respond to the prompt of guilt and disaffinity as much as to warm goodwill. A knot of tensions or psychic complexes is exposed, without censoriousness, even with a hint of approval that the character lives out his own contradictions. Where psychological discourses sanitise or pathologise, literature accommodates and dramatises. And insofar as the language and modus operandi of psychoanalysis have been popularised and integrated into everyday ways of refracting reality, this is a society at odds with its fantasy life.

The widespread need for the recognition of those inexplicable departures from what one is allowed to feel is manifested in the success of films like David Lynch’s Blue Velvet, and in the proliferating S/M subculture, which has never been more widespread. The fact that so many people are involved in skin piercing, tattooing, wearing bondage garments,

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8 I am indebted to Professor Malcolm Bowie for this insight, among many others.
9 Spark, The Mandelbaum Gate.
and that they perform rituals of 'scarification' and so on seems to be a matter of continual
surprise to the Sunday supplement writers and readers, even if the same kind of material,
rehashed in different contexts, has been served up regularly for at least the last fifteen
years. It hardly needs saying that the mediatisation of such subcultural masochistic activity
allows a vicarious participation, albeit denied or unrecognised, in readers.

In fact, it is not hard to find societies in which practices of inflicting and willingly
accepting pain and humiliation are the norm rather than the exception: these are, in
general, tribal societies and the practices in question are initiation rituals or rites of
passage. They usually involve the accession to full membership of the tribal group, to adult
status, or to a particular religious group, so particularly apply to young people about to
embark on adult life. Ceremonies take the form of a test of endurance or of physical
strength and prowess. They include skin and muscle piercing, fasting, exposure to harsh
sunlight, self-mutilation with knives, bondage, branding, severe beatings, burnings.
Initiates are expected to show self-control, to bear their punishment without flinching. It
does not seem to be taxing credulity too much to argue that in a 'developed' society like
this one, people on the brink of adulthood in particular feel a need to undergo a rite of
passage, in order to symbolise to themselves and their peer group their capacity to face the
rigours ahead. It seems important to recognise the valuable work of subcultural groups in
evolving symbolisations to deal with psychic difficulties. The body engages as a site of
pain, allowing a repressed physicality to re-emerge in an extreme moment marked indelibly
upon it.
One thing the S/M subculture does is to remind us of other, perhaps richer, ways of inhabiting our bodies. Leo Bersani, whose ideas I find helpful, has an interesting discussion of S/M in his most recent book, in which he writes: ‘With its costumes, its roles, its rituals, its theatricalised dialogue, S/M is the extravagantly fantasmatic logos of the psyche... It generously offers us its playrooms - in the charming illusion that, once having left the playroom, we will give up the pleasures that S/M has helped us recognise as irresistible.’

There are links with literature at numerous levels. Literature involves and responds to fantasy and it is possible retrospectively to locate masochistic processes at work from Dante (the depiction of the sinners’ sufferings in the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*) through to Herbert (most exquisitely in the erotic description of Christ’s wounds in ‘The Agonie’), and onwards. Masochism may be identified with a particular character who suffers pleasurably, or it may dispense with such figuring by addressing the reader so as to produce a masochistic response. Such masochistic processes will always remind us of the body: a body which is punished, mutilated, wounded, deformed. The suffering undergone in masochistic textuality is always meaningful, never mere wasted flesh, pointless carnage. Dante’s sinners are distorted in their bodies in a sense exactly analogous to their spiritual deformities. In the texts directly addressed in this work, by Michel Leiris and Marguerite Duras, the experience of pain enables specific excursions

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10 Bersani, *Hemos*, p. 91.
11 Dante, *The Divine Comedy*.
12 Herbert, ‘The Agonie’ in Gardner (ed.), *The Metaphysical Poets*, p. 120:

‘Who knows not Love, let him assay
And taste that juice, which on the crosse a pike
Did set again abroach; then let him say
If ever he did taste the like, Love is that liquor sweet and most divine,
Which my God feels as bloud; but I, as wine.’
from the self: transformations of gender, openings out of self-containment, engagements with death. Partly because of the neglect by critics of the masochistic imaginations I have not attempted any totalising theory of the masochistic text. There are so many works to be reevaluated and reviewed that I would not want to pre-empt future possibilities by an over-eager tying up and packaging of literary masochism. Besides, masochism is not a straightforwardly characterisable mode or tendency. It may have needed to be named, but under its name it has changed its guise: for Krafft-Ebing, humiliation is its essence, for Freud, pain.\textsuperscript{13} Masochism may be moral or physical and may offer differing possibilities across the gender divide. It may respond to a finite need - the rite of passage, for example - but there is certainly a universal masochism, one that is essential to subjectivity, identity, the capacity to fantasise.

We are confronted with a multiplicity of masochisms and a multiplicity of ways of reading them. I have limited myself to a minimal set of texts, these being the ones I needed to look at to bring masochism out of the exile to which psychoanalysis has, for the most part, expelled it, and where literary critics have left their spectacles. The notable exception here is Bersani, who, using a perspective developed initially by psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche, has reread the Freudian corpus to construct a lively and exciting theory of sexual masochism as a form of ethical hygiene and as a theory of literary creativity and readerly response to the 'self-shattering' \textit{jouissance} afforded by poetry.\textsuperscript{14} Bersani's work

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{13}] Bill Thompson polemically sums up the inconsistency of argumentation as follows: 'The psychiatrists cannot agree amongst themselves what masochism is. At various times they have suggested that it is a form of manipulation, a plea for help, a method of making oneself lovable, the down-side of artistic creativity, and a religious expression.' \textit{Sadomasochism}, p.55.

\item[\textsuperscript{14}] Bersani, \textit{The Culture of Redemption}; \textit{The Freudian Body}, and more recently, \textit{Homos}. See chapter one and conclusion for further references to his work.
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is all the more valuable in that it recognises the erotic risk present in a text we encounter in the same way as another person, a text grounded in subjectivity, and to which the reader surrenders. Bersani, then, has been the instigator of the infrastructural work so badly needed to rediscover the hidden continent of the masochistic imaginary. While I take many of his insights as crucial to my own project, I do not share his loyalty to Freud, nor do I take his elaboration of the concepts of sublimation and idealisation at work in artistic endeavour as restricted to a psychoanalytic vocabulary. Thus I am happy to move between a tightly argued post-Freudian theoretical work like his and the illustrative, loose woven presentations of contemporary Jungians like James Hillman and Lyn Cowan, whose approach is more intuitive.

Clearly, psychoanalysis and literature are the two areas of inquiry I bring together here, in my already stated intention of balancing the books. A third field, theology, is also brought in. Part of the need for this is to present a fully developed alternative to the view of suffering presented by psychoanalysis: from a religious perspective, suffering makes perfect sense. Modern and postmodern Christian theology goes some way towards a narrativising of the life of Christ as a necessary descent into the profane, towards a redemptive end. I refer to such work in trying to get at how masochism works, how a downward movement into pain, humiliation and abjection leads to *jouissance*, a moment of sublime perfection. Bringing the religious vocabulary of the soul back into the picture also allows me to move away from a too-mechanistic, too-materialist perspective on subjectivity. I suggest that the interiority to which Jean Laplanche refers in his crucial
discussion of the masochistic nature of infantile fantasy\textsuperscript{15} may be psychoanalysis' best description of what theology calls the soul, despite the mutual horror of the parties concerned. If I am to be accused of being disrespectfully acquisitive, of plundering incommensurate vocabularies, my defence is that each of these disciplines offers something necessary to a description of the masochistic sensibility, yet none offers the language appropriate to the object, a language engaged and committed to the body, but a body turned inwards as well as outwards, a fatal and spiritual body. For other reasons, too, religious discourses are germane to my argument: a full-blooded, heterodox, sceptical but engaged Christianity like that of Miguel de Unamuno's focuses on the indivisibility of body and soul, and insists that any redemption we anticipate must be of this flesh alone. The metaphorical relevance of this to masochistic redemption is evident. Masochism is a narrative fusing of extremes, and cannot do without them: the profanity of sexual abjection only has meaning in contrast with effusive bliss. Unamuno's argument that we create God - a God who has created our capacity to create him - focuses for me the necessity of a movement of sublimation which cannot be sustained, which must always represent the opposite point to a disgraceful profanity, out of which it grows and into which it must collapse. That Unamuno was a prolific and gifted novelist (though his works are not considered here, since I have restricted myself to a small number of texts which move forward my thinking on literary masochism) seems less than coincidental.

Simone Weil is the emblematic figure of the moral masochist. Her identification with a dying Christ nailed to the cross brought her to a true \textit{imitatio Christi} - she devoted her life

\textsuperscript{15} Laplanche, \textit{Vie et mort en psychanalyse}. 
to her own highly individual form of socialism, in which she engaged body and soul. Weil produced a distinctive moral philosophy, emphasising physical engagement and work. She is, from my perspective, the patron saint of masochism. Her example shows how the iconography of Christianity has been used to absorb masochistic identifications and to initiate the sublimating movement from raw physical pain to spiritual grace, most obviously exemplified in the lives of the martyrs.

Christianity can offer a useful narrative lesson, but has little or nothing to offer to an enquiry about sexuality. Sexuality is not the whole story of masochism, but it is a large part of it. It is not enough to insist that pain heightens pleasure, not is it generally even true. When we free masochism from the imputation of perversion - or, alternatively, celebrate that category - it has much to tell us about the nature of sexual pleasure. As Bersani suggests, what gives us pleasure and jouissance may be precisely what we cannot easily absorb, an overstimulus of the body or psyche. From outside the sphere of literary studies, criminologist Bill Thompson has shown that fantasy is at the core of masochism, with participants' need for an 'overwhelming emotional experience' linked to a symbolic submission.\(^\text{16}\) The point is to submit to something - a feeling or a person - bigger than oneself.

Is there not something shameful and sordid about all this? Doubtless such responses are part of the masochistic mise en scène. Nobody likes to be humiliated, and perhaps masochists least of all. Within masochistic sexual engagement, and in literary masochism, we come up against that ego-death that we avoid so assiduously on every other occasion.

\(^{16}\) Cf. Thompson, *Sadomasochism*, p.166.
Perhaps there is an element of hygiene about this. Civilised to a polite co-operation and self-repression in our daily lives, surely the bedroom and the bookshelf should be places where we can let it all hang out, discharging those shameful and repellent desires without bothering anyone else about them? Is there not, indeed, something resourceful about the active masochist, whose need to voyage into the Underworld of sexuality would, if repressed, turn up in real pathology, at a high cost to the individual and the social fabric? In chapter two, I cite Masud Khan’s recognition of a masochism whose satisfaction is gained by visiting the psychoanalyst. Consensual sadomasochism might be and already is, for some, a more pleasurable and enriching way of dealing with the pain of loss, the boredom of work, the anxiety of existence.

I have moved from a discussion of the masochistic imagination to masochistic sexuality. The fact is that the level of the debate on sadomasochism as a practice has already made quite an impact in the field of cultural studies, whereas the question of literature and a masochistic imaginary has been relatively neglected. Since the two areas are inextricably linked, however, it seems important here to situate my standpoint in relation to recent works. Much of the defence of or affirmation of sadomasochistic sexuality emerges from lesbian work, pioneered by Pat Califia in the late eighties. Califia saw S/M as parodying the repressed sexuality behind a dominant order which itself oppressed and persecuted dangerously dissident sexualities. The debate resurfaced around the question of fetishism, particularly in relation to the visual arts and led the editor of cultural studies journal *New Formations* to ask, in a special issue devoted to perversion, whether it was anything more

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18 Califia, *Macho Sluts*. 
than a highly marketable commodity. The S/M subculture was flourishing in London and New York, as well as the longstanding locus of San Francisco, and was felt to be a phenomenon that needed a mark of recognition.

Meanwhile, critics of homophobia have been putting normative psychoanalysis under pressure. Jonathan Dollimore has convincingly argued the case against the dominant conception of the perversions which, of course, includes homosexuality alongside masochism. Criticising the failure of psychoanalysis and of literary theory to recognise the cultural centrality of perversion, Dollimore reinvests the term with a full-blooded sense of transgression and insurrection. Perversion becomes a political category rather than a pathological one. Dollimore's notion of perversion comes to challenge the integrity of the psychoanalytic project - and the key readings which trigger this challenge are works on masochism by Bersani, Silverman, and Laplanche. Dollimore is alert to the centrality of masochism in the narrative of Christ's death, remarking: 'What else, after all, was Christ in his death but the keenest image of abjection and arrogance, the epitome of that transgressive masochism which has played such an important part in making and unmaking our culture, not least in the figure of the martyr, and which figures, over and again, in the cultural depictions of the crucifix?' The imitation of Christ, which I will argue is at the heart of the masochistic imagination, is something like Dollimore's notion of the transgressive reinscription - though my conception is less parodic, more of a translation to a different register.

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19 Squires, Editorial in New Formations, page v.
20 Dollimore, Sexual Dissidence.
21 Silverman, 'Masochism and male subjectivity'.
22 Dollimore, op. cit., p.286.
Much of the theoretical reclaiming of perversion and perversity as positive values has come from within the lesbian and gay lobby. As identified with the most obvious perversion, gay men and lesbians have been at pains to refute claims of pathology and take up a strongly affirmative, celebratory stance. The advances made in the last few years have made the ‘invert’ a ludicrous concept: and clearly, if one perversion has been thoroughly discredited, the others are equally up for grabs. What is opening up is a treasure trove, locked away from recognition by the early sexologists. In fighting their corner, gay thinkers and activists have opened up potential debates on almost every perversion listed in *Psychopathia Sexualis* - and there are many.

Feminism has been slow to respond to these challenges. The spectre of real male violence and real humiliation of women by men is ever present, and popular psychology links sadism with actual torture and murder. So this is, understandably, a hard nettle for feminism to grasp. Again, Pat Califia\(^\text{23}\) has argued that feminism glorifies a particular kind of sexual engagement, a gentle, loving, romantic kind of sex which reflects the preoccupations of the normative mainstream, against which (lesbian) sadomasochism rebels and which it derides. So while a widespread view within feminism would see masochistic practices as undesirably reflecting and acting out feminine submission to male violence, that view is criticised as conforming to a repressive orthodoxy which also mimics a conventional notion of what sexuality should be.

A third position from within feminism has been incisively argued in an essay by Marie France.\(^\text{24}\) She emphasises the repression of sadomasochism, viewing the latter as similar

\(^{23}\) Califia, ‘Feminism and Sadomasochism’.

\(^{24}\) France, ‘Sadomasochism and Feminism’. 
to gay struggles in being based on an affirmation of one’s sexual practices and in coming up against similar difficulties. In a statement which I consider extremely useful, she writes: ‘Sadomasochism is a reaction to living under patriarchy and not a reflection of it.’

Women who enjoy masochistic behaviour cannot be seen as somehow colluding in their own oppression, because this ignores the role of fantasy, and that of pleasure. As France points out, to act out the feminine role in its most extreme form could be a subversive feminist act - given that the masochist enjoys it. Non-consenting surrender to patriarchal relations is a different matter, since it is not chosen, nor can it be dropped at a moment’s notice. France steers clear, however, of an identity-politics based on sexual preference, and here, too, I would echo her position. It may be that we are all masochists, in the same way that nobody is purely heterosexual. But some of us are actively masochistic for specific reasons and at certain moments, others are masochistic all the time, some use masochism to create works of art and literature, while most, perhaps, deny and repress their masochistic tendencies. One of the goals of this work is to support a move to acknowledge a neglected area of human sexuality and imagination. Another is to suggest that alongside the decriminalisation of consensual sadomasochism should come the recognition of the importance of masochistic elements in works of art and in the social fabric. I would affirm my own masochism, but as one constituent element of a highly plural psyche.

Lorrain Gamman and Merja Makinen look at the question from a quite different angle: carefully defining their terms, they state their support for a model of sexual diversity, but

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25 Ibid., p.40.
26 Gamman and Makinen, Female Fetishism: a New Look.
one which depends upon the consent of the adults concerned and which inflicts no lasting harm upon any of the participants. They exclude, for example, paedophilia from their model on the grounds that a child is not able genuinely to consent, and that sexual activity with children has been proven to cause lasting harm. For Gamman and Makinen, perversion and perversity are things that women are encouraged to reclaim, alongside their reclaiming of a right to define themselves as fully sexual identities. Where one wing of feminist thought - most clearly articulated by psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin - sees patriarchal gender relations within familial structures as the cause of women’s masochism, taking for granted the need for a quiet eroticism, Gamman and Makinen bemoan the fact that women’s diverse sexual behaviours have been overlooked by the sexologists and are encouraging of a lively, heterogenous feminine sexuality.

These studies and others have taken masochism and sadomasochism out of the closet. Part of my project here is to contribute to the debate by critiquing psychoanalytic concepts, but also by moving on to show how, given particular inflections by Laplanche and Bersani, psychoanalytic theory has something very interesting to tell us about the nature of fantasy and why we need literature so much. In liberating masochism from its pejorative associations and in affirming its value, fantasy and the imagination are placed back at the centre of the cultural arena.

Fantasy is conceived here not as a flight from reality, but as the reworking of elements of the known. In particular, fantasy uncovers hidden areas of the real, areas hidden because of their familiarity, their ordinariness. The work of the imagination represents certain facets of knowledge somehow in a different light, revealing in them their
unheimlich quality. Masochistic fantasy is right at the centre of the capacity to imagine, to move through a number of subject positions. This argument - of masochism's centrality to the work of imagining - is different from and opposed to the view that masochism is something imposed from outside the subject by someone, or something else. This is the position, for example, that Michelle A. Massé takes up in her re-examination of Gothic literature. Massé asserts that masochism is 'the end result of a long and varyingly successful cultural training' of women. She sees the causes of women's masochism as external and real and for example, thinks that the Gothic heroine becomes a masochist, which for Massé means turning inward her active drives, finding virtue in renunciation, giving up all agency. From my perspective, this is a deeply flawed argument, not just because Massé assumes that all masochists are women, and denies the crucial element of sexual pleasure in masochism, thus seeing her heroines as victims. To conflate a desired sexual engagement with the suffering of patriarchal oppression is a fundamental error, in my view. But what is worse is the view of masochism as an extra-textual affair, a social problem at the heart of Western culture's gender arrangements, to which literature, and in particular the Gothic novel, responds. Of course this problem - the crushing of women's self-realisatory impulses in male-dominated societies - is compelling, but the attraction of submitting to power which is dramatised in masochism may be an attempt to draw the sting, rather than a simple mimesis. And as Leo Bersani rather depressingly points out, oppressive structures may have an appeal independent of the political ideologies that exploit them, suggesting 'their probable resurgence even if the political conditions that

27 Massé, In the Name of Love.
nourish them were to be eliminated'. Masochism is in here, in the psyche, not just out there in history, it is a fundamental imaginative possibility and as such the stuff of literature, is what makes literature readable, through its reception into an interiority that it anticipates in advance. Responding to reality along its fissures of difficulty, representing and reworking that exterior world through fantasy, through the reconstitution of its given constituents, is what the masochistic imagination does best. Masochism offers no fairy tale endings or better worlds: it inhabits this world's violence and unfairness, snatching back from it a pleasure it could never render. On one level masochism situates an imagination which faces up to the nastiness, the horror, which takes in that brutality, neither refusing it nor accepting it as an order, but strangely transforming it, making it unrecognisable to itself, *unheimlich*, yet so very well known.

My premise in this work is that if we are to discuss masochism it is important to look at the works of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. It is a tribute that few critics have paid, the notable exception being Gilles Deleuze, whose authoritative commentary on Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* has supplied my starting point, that masochism is a literary matter primarily, rather than a psychoanalytic one. Deleuze considers Sacher-Masoch as a great writer through his development of certain themes and formal concerns present in German Romanticism, through his knowledge and use of myth and folklore, and through his creation of a cold aesthetic suspense. Deleuze decries the unfair neglect of Sacher-Masoch's work; this is far worse in the English speaking world, where only a single translation of the Austrian novelist's work is to be located, than in the French speaking

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29 Deleuze, *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch*. 
world, where several volumes are in print and easily available. Doubtless the neglect of
Sacher-Masoch is due to a blind spot in our culture: do we think we already know him
because we have read Sade? Deleuze rejects the notion of the complementarity between
sadism and masochism, the equivalency that gave masochism its ‘selling point’ from the
moment the neologism was created. I follow Deleuze here, reserving the term
sadomasochism for the description of sexual practices involving masochism, though as I
will argue, the other person in such practices need have no sadistic desires at all, but
simply represent a torturing, powerful figure. ‘Puisque le jugement clinique est plein de
préjugés, il faut tout recommencer par un point situé hors de la clinique, le point
littéraire,’ writes Deleuze.\textsuperscript{30} And this is not just because masochism derives from a
writer’s name, but because the specificity of masochism is bound up in the literary values
of Sacher-Masoch. The fact is that masochism was created \textit{in order} to be complementary
to sadism. Once the link is severed, the originality of masochism can begin to be
understood in its own terms.

For this reason, I would not go along with a position that Leo Bersani has recently
elaborated which, while keeping intact his earlier description of masochism as a
momentary undoing of the subject, attempts to rearticulate it with sadism.\textsuperscript{31} His notion of
sadism as containing within it the fantasy of suicidal \textit{jouissance} seems distinctly
persuasive, but the further argument that masochism can be seen as an effect of sadism in
that the aggressive aim rebounds, engendering a self-reflexive aggressiveness, seems to fall
back into an early Freudian model which lacks respect for the distinctness and specificity

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., p.11.
\textsuperscript{31} Bersani, \textit{Homo}s.
of masochism. More helpful is his political reading of masochism, in response to a thinking through of Foucault’s work on sexuality in relation to disciplinarrian structures. His view echoes Dollimore’s on perversity and Marie France’s feminist analysis in seeing masochism as an effective and even powerful resistance to coercive design. For Bersani in *Homos*, masochistic *jouissance* makes the subject ‘unfindable’ as an object of punishment - the subject temporarily disappears. The renunciation of power over the world that occurs in a sexual surrender is, Bersani thinks, an extraordinary challenge to the constraints imposed by identity.

I want to move back to a discussion of the literary specificity of masochism via certain comments thrown out by writer Edmund White. White describes sadomasochistic practices as a strategy by which: ‘both partners, functioning under the benign dispensation of make-believe, re-enact not their own private troubles but rather our society’s nightmarish preoccupations with power, with might.’\(^3\) In a really unfair society dominated by racism, sexism, economic exploitation and inauthenticity, there are only two means of recognising and responding. One is the joke, which for White defuses outrage, dampens indignation, and is a surrender to the status quo; the other is sadomasochism, which acts out the truth of humiliation, domination, in a clarity which the participant needs to witness. White quotes Simone Weil on the prevalence of lying and self-deception in order to endure the miserable reality we inhabit. Like Weil, the masochist needs to know the truth. Sadomasochistic practices exorcise the frightening violence which surges outside and through us, attempting to reduce it to the sexual, to grasp it. The complexity of this

\(^3\) White ‘Sado Machismo’ in *The Burning Library*, p.63.
view is in the linking of ‘make-believe’ with truth. Only by pretending can we get at the truth. This paradox may be hard to grasp in a society compelled by science more than art. Sadomasochism, from this perspective, could be seen as a form of conceptual art, enacting a truth already known to both participants: a truth of the psyche in its need for an over-stimulus that it will defuse through sexuality: a truth of the body caught up in the grip of power relations: and a fatal truth, a consciousness of mortality.

Sacher-Masoch is a key figure for this argument - the man who wrote books in which men enjoyed domination by powerful, dangerous women. Two of his novels are considered in chapter three, and there is an examination of the process by which Krafft-Ebing took up his name and literary value. An interesting and useful historical reading by Carol Seigel\textsuperscript{33} describes the redefinition of sacrificial, passionate masculine love for women as perverted and unmanly. She ascribes the success of this move and its historical importance for masculinity as resulting from the threat posed by active political feminism in the late nineteenth century and the growing success in the English speaking world of women authors. We are reminded of the fact that in Sacher-Masoch’s personal life, his two great loves were both aspirant writers. His response to their threat was, of course, at variance with what was to become the dominant ideology of gender relations. From Seigel’s perspective, one could propose a Sacher-Masoch seen as a continuer of traditional conventions of representing male love, albeit with something all of his own. The pathologising of male masochism not only by Freud and the early sexologists, but also, in Seigel’s view, by male writers such as Thackeray or Hardy, who opposed or parodied

\textsuperscript{33} Seigel, \textit{Male Masochism}. 
excessive male love, also, it seems to me, implies a redefinition of masculinity itself. This version of masculinity - ultra-heterosexual, emotionally guarded - is now under pressure from many quarters, not least feminism.

The sacrificial male lover has not disappeared during the twentieth century, and neither has his literary counterpart. The work of Michel Leiris, whose autobiography *L'Age d'homme* I look at in chapter four, continues to present an emotionally incontinent narrator who feels stuck in his masculine identity. He is not rigidly heterosexual. The women who fascinate him most are the dominatrixes. If much modern literature by men either shores up the dominant typing of the male as active and dispassionate (Hemingway, for example) or simply assumes the right to represent a totality from a distinctly gendered position (Bataille, for example), Leiris shows a troubled male for whom there is no way forward or out - except through writing.

My final chapter looks at three short works by Marguerite Duras. These were probably the most difficult texts to write about, but also very exciting in dramatising women's masochism as excessive and troubling, erotic and dangerous, rather than the tame, domesticated variant we read about in, for example, Freud. Death, or a kind of death-in-life stalks the picture, and in Duras, by contrast with male masochist writers, there is no place for humour. The joke is lost on her. The war of the sexes is also the space of ultimate jouissance. Duras represents psychic spaces and relations as they have never been shown before: her work seems to put into play certain embodied elements: love, death. Put differently: sex, money. Or again: masculine/feminine. In Duras's work, oppositions fight it out until their energy is exhausted. Power and the conflict with power produces the
erotic. Ultimately, Duras's work moves away from questions of gender, is better understood as an almost philosophical enquiry into the opaque human spirit.

I have argued earlier that literature's value lies at least partly in its capacity to illuminate our darker sides, the hidden order beneath the rational exterior. It may be that those psychic demons with leathery wings double as flute-playing angels. One side cannot be suppressed without oppressing the other: therefore this is a work which addresses the impoverished realm of the spiritual as well as the maligned and trivialised realm of the senses.
CHAPTER ONE

I. A great danger

Here I want to look at Freud's most explicit attempt to analyse the phenomenon of masochism - his 1924 essay, 'The Economic Problem of Masochism' - to show the problem it represented as an object of study for the founding father of psychoanalysis.

It is not hard to detect theoretical confusion here, nor the heavy reliance on mechanistic models to prop up a pre-given mutuality between sadism and masochism. However, I suggest that if we return to Freud's earlier remarks on the death instinct, we find him the more visionary aspect of his thought, and the potential for an elaboration of a universal masochism closely linked to the workings of Thanatos in the psyche begins to open up.

The opening remarks of 'The Economic Problem of Masochism' situate this human tendency as something of an enigma for the scientist of the human passions. It is 'mysterious from the economic point of view', 'incomprehensible', and can be compared to a drug. And not only mysterious, but threatening. Masochism appears, says Freud, 'in the light of a great danger'. It paralyses the pleasure principle, the watchman over our mental life. In spite of the fact that masochistic tortures rarely take the extreme forms that sadistic cruelties do, he considers the former perversion more dangerous.

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1 Referred to here as Freud, 'Masochism'.
2 Ibid., p.413.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
Freud begins to interpret the enigma. The content of masochistic fantasies consists of 'being gagged, bound, painfully beaten, whipped, in some way maltreated, forced into unconditional obedience, dirtied and debased'. The psychoanalyst draws a conclusion that he considers both obvious and easy to arrive at, that the masochist wishes to be treated as a small and helpless child, a naughty child. Is Freud claiming that parents or guardians dirtied and debased their children, gagged and bound them, in response to acts of naughtiness? He suggests here that the masochist’s desire is for a return to an event in infancy, a real event, a regression to an infantile state.

So on the one hand, masochism is dangerous and mysterious; on the other, it is a childish regression. Further, it is feminine, he says, because it places the subject ‘in a characteristically female situation’. The three characteristically female situations exemplified are of being castrated, being copulated with, and giving birth to a baby. Do they bear scrutiny? It is true that giving birth is a uniquely feminine possibility, but its importance in masochistic fantasy seems to have been missed by other analysts. It does not appear, for example, in the sections on masochism in Krafft-Ebing’s comprehensive encyclopaedia of the perversions, Psychopathia Sexualis. Being copulated with may have seemed a uniquely female possibility for Freud in his time, but both before, during and since, men have been known to take up a more passive role, and today this would be considered well within the range of sexual activities considered normal. Freud’s least convincing example is that of being castrated, for no woman can undergo castration, since she is not in possession of a penis. To make

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5 Ibid., p.416.
6 Ibid.
sense of this example, one would have to revise it as: being in the same position as the woman, who is already castrated.\(^7\)

On the one side is positioned Freud, adult upstanding male: on the other, masochism, childish, feminine, mysterious, dangerous. This is to personalise the question, to sense the unease with which Freud the man faces the challenge of masochism. Masochism comes out as everything he is not: does not being masochistic make him a man? In this essay there is an almost palpable sense of Freud’s unease with and distaste for what he is interpreting. However, to comment on the psychoanalyst’s underlying involvement, to see his masculinity at work in the essay, is only one aspect of this examination.

Freud reads masochism from a masculinist position. His will to mastery of the child-woman masochism undermines his potential real mastery of his subject. Wrestling with the pathology, he stumbles upon his own ineptness. In discussing the guilt content of masochistic fantasies, he remarks that the subject assumes that he has committed a crime, to be expiated by ‘all these painful and tormenting procedures’.\(^8\) Immediately after, in what seems like an access of guilt, he allows that ‘this looks like a superficial rationalisation of the masochistic subject-matter’. A proposed link with infantile masturbation allows him to move forward again. Another lapse into self-doubt occurs in his remarks on the feminine form of the tendency. After pointing out that feminine masochism has a physiological foundation in that the excitation of pain in the organism, like any other internal process, arouses the sexual instinct, Freud remarks that this

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7 Male masochism does, of course, contain a strong element of cross-gender identification, one which, in my chapter on Michel Leiris, I consider to result from a dissatisfaction with rigid masculine identity construction.

8 Freud, 'Masochism', p.417.
explanation is inadequate and that it throws no light on the connection between sadism and masochism.

The task he now performs is to integrate the concept of an original, erotogenic masochism with the reality of sadism and masochism, to construct a framework which knits the two perversions together while allowing masochism its primary position. For Freud in this essay, the libido performs its work of externalising the death instinct with only partial success. Sadism, the will to power in the sexual domain, shows the libido triumphant over the death instinct, but 'another portion' of it remains within the organism, becoming libidinally bound there.

Is Freud on solid ground in claiming that this description is not in contradiction with his previous articulation of an 'infantile physiological mechanism' which ceases to operate later on? His first model is developmental and still considers masochism as a perversion when it appears in adulthood. The second model proposes a struggle between Eros and Thanatos, the pleasure principle and the death instinct, which between them fashion our being. In this second proposition, masochism is that part of the death instinct which will not be tamed. This articulation makes it mythical, universal, and allows us to think of it as having a certain dignity, allows us to think of the masochist as a Christ-like figure.

Freud hints at this potential reading in his discussion of moral masochism, when he remarks that 'the true masochist always turns his cheek whenever he has a chance of receiving a blow'. The self-mortifying Christian response to aggression is set in a secular framework which claims to excavate the underlying gratification on offer to the

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9 Ibid., p.418.
10 Ibid., p.417.
11 Ibid., p.420.
subject. In the Freudian economy, masochism is shown to make some sort of profit, however little that is evident.

Sadism and masochism are identical, says the psychoanalyst, ‘if one is prepared to overlook a little inexactitude.’ Sadism and masochism are identical, says the psychoanalyst, ‘if one is prepared to overlook a little inexactitude.’ 12 Projected outwards, sadism is quite capable of returning home, to be introjected as a form of secondary masochism. It rejoins that part of the death instinct which refused taming, the quantity or proportion of which ‘we cannot at present guess’. 13

If one were not prepared to overlook a little inexactitude, one would probably be a moral masochist. Such individuals display quite the reverse tendency to Freud’s: rather than pleading for tolerance, and expecting to get it, they will, according to his account, go to the ends of the earth to seek out chastisement from authority figures. The moral masochist will act inexpediently and against his self-interest, ruin his prospects and possibly even destroy himself. Why would anyone want to behave against their own interests, or put an end to their life? For Freud it is self-evident that such behaviour is pathological. At its root is an ‘unconscious sense of guilt’, 14 which offers one of the most serious obstacles to the success of psychoanalysis as a cure. To satisfy this guilty conscience, a certain amount of unhappiness must be maintained, either through the neuroses or through unhappy marriages. In such people, the superego, constructed via the introjection of parental figures, has become cruel and harsh towards the ego. The masochist is someone who has a sadistic superego.

In Freud’s account of moral masochism, then, a child is being beaten continually, on the psychic level, by a cruel parent. Childhood development detaches the subject from

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12 Ibid., p.419.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., p.421.
real parental figures and replaces them with other authorities, the last figure in the series of which is God. For God, in this perspective, is to be seen in human terms. God is a parent figure from whom, thanks to the Oedipus complex, libidinal impulses have been withdrawn, with greater or lesser success, for few of us can regard God as truly impersonal, says Freud. It is as if no-one ever really grows up - all that happens is that the parental figures are introjected, the family is inside the psyche.

Having linked the conscience to the operation of the superego, a superego which derives from the parental imago, which at its most developed is represented by God, Freud has associated moral masochism with religious experience, but only at the expense of characterising the latter as a purely human, personal and secular matter. In the place of ethics, Freud uses the terms, 'cultural suppression of the instincts', an undesirable blockage of the destructive drives which prevents them from exercising themselves. This suppression forces these instincts to retreat and intensifies the masochism of the ego, as we have seen, in a secondary masochism.

Freud everywhere in 'The Economic Problem of Masochism' uses a spatial framework which divides a monadic organism from an exteriority: culture, reality, the 'real external world'. It is into this world that the libido would have the death drive dispersed. But frequently, this outside, civilisation, refuses its role as a handy receptacle, attempting with varying success to push the death drive back inwards. By a further portioning out, part of the returning sadism arrives in the superego, intensifying its existing tendency to punish, while part arrives in the ego, concentrating its wish for punishment. Either of the two outcomes, says Freud, produces the same effects.

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15 Ibid., p.425.
16 Ibid., p.422.
Freud has emphasised the difference between individuals with a sadistic superego or ‘unconscious extension of morality’\textsuperscript{17} and those with masochistic egos, and actually demands forgiveness for having confused the two. Yet if ‘the sadism of the superego and the masochism of the ego supplement each other and unite to produce the same effects’,\textsuperscript{18} then how is it possible to separate them? If moral masochism can be described as a temptation to perform ‘sinful’\textsuperscript{19} actions, which must then be expiated by the reproaches of a sadistic conscience, then is it a question of ultra-morality or of the infantile desire for punishment? Freud claims that an individual may have hung on to some part of his ethical sense alongside his masochism, but that on the other hand, his conscience may have vanished into his masochism. There seems to be an attempt to rescue an intra-psychic sadism from an intra-psychic masochism which threatens to swallow it whole. But what accompanies this is a characterisation of the ethically oversensitive as, to all intents and purposes, the same as moral masochists. The psychoanalyst seems to wish that a decent level of morality, that which in a moral person is arrived at through the Oedipal desexualisation of the parent figure, could be preserved, but that people should not become too attached to their morality. Is moral masochism, then, the result of a regression to the Oedipus complex? Or is it the result of a cultural suppression of the instincts? Is it a developmental abnormality, a perversion, or is it the result of a culture stamping down upon the organism’s attempt to expel the death instinct via sadism?

Freud’s closing remarks in this essay emphasise the link of masochism with the death instinct, and that it is this which makes the tendency so dangerous. If one returns

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p.424.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p.425.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p.424.
to his elaboration of the role of the death instinct, in the 1920 essay Beyond the Pleasure Principle, it becomes obvious that the watchman over our mental life has an opponent of far greater strength, and that his attempts at taming the death instinct are bound to meet with limited success. In the earlier essay, Freud makes the legendary assertion that 'the aim of all life is death'. This echoes with the later description of masochism, in which pain and unpleasure are 'not simply warnings, but aims'. The watchman, the pleasure principle, has been relegated the thankless task of defending the organism from its own most powerful and fundamental tendency - to return to the inorganic state whence it originated.

In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud says that 'strictly speaking, it is incorrect to talk of the dominance of the pleasure principle over the course of the mental processes'. The tendency to pleasure is opposed by the reality principle and the cultural repression of instincts. Freud also here describes the fort-da game, in which the disappearance and return of the mother is staged by the throwing of the cotton reel and its retrieval. How is this 'distressing experience' of the mother's absence able to be a source of satisfaction for the little boy? This and other games of a similar nature allow the child to master a disagreeable experience, he thinks. And for adults, tragedy, which does not spare them the most painful experience, can be 'highly enjoyable'. Freud rules these cases out of indicating any tendency beyond the pleasure principle. They are examples of transformations of unpleasure into pleasure.

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20 Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle.
21 Ibid. p.311.
22 Freud, 'Masochism', p.413.
23 Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, p.277.
24 Ibid., p.285.
25 Ibid., p.287.
Stronger than the pleasure principle is the compulsion to repeat - for Freud, 'more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual' than the libido. The drive towards death is stronger than any protection the pleasure principle can afford. If the organism's aim is to find its own way to death, then, Freud says, 'the theoretical importance of the instincts of self-preservation, of self-assertion and of mastery greatly diminishes'.

The thoughts that Freud develops in the earlier essay seem to open up the possibility of a far more interesting view of masochism than that of the pathology he will go on to describe in 1924. If not only the libido but also the products of its taming influence, sadism and the will to power, are less fundamental than the compulsion to repeat, the way would be open to consider masochism as a repetition of an event which had not yet taken place, the death of the organism. It could be thought of as growing from a sense of mortality: a longing to experience the inevitable annihilation of the self in a kind of prefiguration: to speak to the death to come, to bring it to life in sexual masochism, through a primitive and elemental rite. The analysand, says Freud, may feel an obscure fear of the emergence of the compulsion to repeat, 'with its hint of possession by some daemonic power'. The tormenting procedures to which the masochist submits might also be thought as having a transformative potential, like the experience of tragedy, where pain is converted to pleasure, the numbness of habit to a keener sense of life.

Freud is keen to characterise what he calls in the earlier essay the instinct towards perfection, in the second, moral masochism, as the result of cultural repression. It

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26 Ibid., p.294.
27 Ibid., p.311.
28 Ibid., p.292.
appears in a minority of human individuals. He sardonically remarks that it has brought them 'to their present high level of intellectual achievement and ethical sublimation' and may be expected to 'watch over their development into supermen'. This neurotic flight from the satisfaction of an instinct is rare: only in a few cases does the economic situation favour such development. Such individuals are driven: there is to be no halting at any position attained, but a continual forward movement, a striving, an 'untiring compulsion'. It is as if there is also something possessed about such people - but where the sexual masochist seeks daemonic debasement, the moral masochist aspires to divine grace, without being able to reach it.

29 Ibid., p.314.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., p.315.
II. Suffering positions

Given Freud’s unease about masochism, it seems contradictory that he should devote a substantial essay to the life and work of Leonardo da Vinci. The very characteristics of which Freud elsewhere speaks with disparagement, are described here with fascination. Leonardo displayed the drive to perfection which Freud elsewhere sardonically dismisses: instead of using his painting talent to achieve wealth, he encountered difficulties due to his inhibition, turning instead to science: and he embodies some aspects of femininity which are here seen as contributing to his genius rather than rendering him passive or pathological.

I will comment on this essay in some detail partly to show a different Freud, less guarded, less dogged, more open to the fascination of the cultural artefact, the painted image, the feminine icon. An identification with Leonardo is detectable at the level of a suppressed mother-worship located in both of the scientists’ awe in front of nature’s wonders, and through the description of the particular painting in question here, ‘St Anne with Two Others’, where the Christ-child is torn between the exercise of strong sexual impulses and the ethical imperative present in the mother’s gaze. The sublimatory moment in which direct sexual pleasure is renounced in favour of its release at the artistic or intellectual level is indicated both by Freud and by Bersani’s commentary on him as crucial to the creative act, and the latter, as I will show, develops Freud’s insights here to construct a conception of sublimation as a form of primary masochism, one which will prove useful to the further exploration of literary masochism.

A decade before the publication of "The Economic Problem of Masochism", Freud's essay 'Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood' offered a portrait of the artist which emphasised certain striking character traits. Freud also discussed in some depth Leonardo's painting 'St Anne with Two Others', the others being the Virgin and child Christ, in order to elucidate the psychosexual development which was to lead to the creation of Leonardo's great works of art. Leonardo had every attribute that might make him happy, Freud considers; he was 'tall and well-proportioned; his features were of consummate beauty and his physical strength unusual; he was charming in his manner, supremely eloquent, and cheerful and amiable to everyone.' 33

In spite of all this, Freud thinks that the artist was not understood by his contemporaries, for his growing experiments with science and his difficult relation to his painting. He 'took up his brush with reluctance, painted less and less, left what he had begun for the most part unfinished and cared little about the ultimate fate of his works'. 34 When he could have been industriously painting to order and becoming rich, as Freud points out that his contemporary Perugino did, he turned away from painting. Yet according to this picture of the artist, Leonardo was not ascetic. On the contrary, Freud remarks that the artist was fond of fine clothing and every domestic refinement, avoiding the noise and dirt involved in sculpture for the relative ease of painting.

As Freud's portrait of the man develops he increasingly focuses a deep tension within the character, on a personality riven by contradictions. Leonardo, beautiful, charming, represents for Freud 'the cool repudiation of sexuality - a thing that would scarcely be expected of an artist and a portrayer of feminine beauty'. 35

33 Ibid., pp.152-3.
34 Ibid., p.154.
35 Ibid., p.158.
sources contemporaneous to Leonardo which claim that the artist found the act of procreation disgusting. He guesses that Leonardo’s relations with the pupils that he took into his studio - chosen purely for their beauty and possibly also for their lack of talent, since not one of them subsequently became known as a painter - did not extend to sexual activity. Evidently desirable, Leonardo was not, according to Freud, desiring, inclined rather to an ideal or sublimated homosexuality.

He seems to have met with as much difficulty in the artistic sphere as in the sexual. Freud cites a remark by one of Leonardo’s pupils: ‘He appeared to tremble the whole time when he set himself to paint, and yet he never completed any work he had begun, having so high a regard for the greatness of art that he discovered faults in things that to others seemed miracles.’ 36 Leonardo’s drive to perfection in his art resulted in his spending three years, Freud says, in painting the Last Supper, during which time he would sometimes climb the scaffolding at daybreak and spend the day painting until twilight, ‘never once laying his brush aside, and with no thought of eating or drinking’. 37 He was unable to complete the painting of the Mona Lisa after four years.

Freud refers to Leonardo’s ‘inhibition’ 38 to explain his slowness and hesitancy in painting, and his gradual abandonment of it in favour of his scientific investigations. Leonardo, in Freud’s view, effected a conversion of sexual passion into the thirst for knowledge. The ‘divine spark’ which motivates all human activity is diverted from sexual aims, then, towards a higher sphere, of artistic and scientific activity. This takes place through sublimation of the libido, which evades repression, freeing itself from any sexual component so that it can devote itself disinterestedly to scientific and

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36 Ibid., p.155.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., p.156.
artistic researches. Leonardo had a rare disposition in that the 'greater part' of his libido was sublimated in this way. Freud remarks on the artist's 'extraordinary capacity for sublimating the primitive instincts', and that to this his genius is directly attributable, because artistic talent and capacity are intimately connected with sublimation.

On what the capacity for sublimation rests, Freud is hard put to say, though he suggests that the organic foundations of character, and particularly the blending of male and female dispositions within it, are crucial. Leonardo's femininity was present constitutionally in his beauty and possibly in his left-handedness. Other than these areas of biological research, to which Freud looks for enlightenment on the question of artistic power, early childhood experiences, he thinks, might hold the key.

The way that Freud reconstructs Leonardo's childhood, of which only the barest details are known, is via the painting, 'St Anne with Two Others', where both Mary and her mother, painted also as a beautiful woman, have the same unmistakeable smile as that of the Mona Lisa, painted not long previously. The smile is described variously as 'unfathomable...always with a touch of something sinister in it' (Freud here is citing Walter Pater), 'mysterious', 'fascinating', 'blissful', and containing 'the promise of unbounded tenderness'. Freud argues that the two figures are Leonardo's two mothers - his true mother, Caterina, the poor peasant girl from whom he was taken between the ages of two and five, and his kind stepmother, Donna Albiera, who

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39 Ibid., p.170.
40 Ibid., p.229.
42 Ibid., p. 204, 205.
43 Ibid., p. 202, 204.
44 Ibid., p. 205, 206.
subsequently brought him up. Freud explains that Caterina’s abandonment by her lover
made her take the infant for a husband, ‘and by the too early maturing of his erotism
robbed him of a part of his masculinity’. Freud is clear that an extremely intense
relationship between mother and infant which he describes as a completely satisfying
love relation, is at the root of Leonardo’s retreat from heterosexuality in particular, and
sexuality in general. The infant’s infatuation with the mother, then, is what effects the
sublimation and produces the rare disposition of the great artist or scientific genius.

Leonardo’s homosexuality Freud finds relatively easy to describe as an infantile
identification with the maternal position, resulting in a narcissistic object choice. But
Leonardo’s extreme capacity for sublimation is not argued any further, although the
same painting, ‘St Anne with Two Others’, seems to offer a clue to the psychic
tensions which propelled Leonardo from an obscure boyhood towards the
extraordinary achievements of his adult life.

In it, the figure of the little boy is shown to be grasping by the ear and attempting to
climb upon the back of a pretty lamb, whose spindly legs are giving way under his
weight. Mary is leaning over from her mother’s lap and taking hold of the child, and he
has turned his head towards her and become locked in her gaze. Mary’s look seems to
bind the child back into the love relation with the mother, a pure protective love which
runs counter to the sadistic sexual drives the child wants to fulfil. This binding, perfect
love is also a denial of agency and autonomy: not necessarily in that the mother wishes
to deny the infant part of his masculinity, as Freud seems to imply, but in that the child
is so taken up, so much in thrall of the mother, that he is unable to move away from
her, or in later life to take any other sexual object for himself. The painting seems to

46 Ibid.
express the liveliness, vigour and adventurous spirit of the infant, in conflict with the
gentleness and kindness, the ethical relation embodied in maternal love. The child’s
body is fully engaged in mounting the lamb even as his face turns back to the mother
in, perhaps, mingled pride at his endeavours and adoration of her. The painting depicts
the impressing upon the child of an ethical relation which opposes itself to sexual
experience, shown as if all sexual experience were necessarily cruel. The choice of the
lamb is significant, a symbol of the innocent, suffering figure of Christ.

As an adult the artist became a vegetarian ‘since he did not think it justifiable to
deprive animals of their lives’. He also used to buy caged birds in the market, and set
them free.

In the St Anne painting, each of the figures is given an object: the child is the love
object of Mary, who sits upon the lap of her mother. The infant’s arms are
outstretched towards the lamb in a mimesis of hers, outstretched towards him. Only
the child is deprived of his object, continually drawn back into the fascinating gaze of
the mother, leading to an impasse which effects sublimation.

Leonardo’s life seems to be a striking illustration of moral masochism: he leaves
paintings unfinished, leaves painting itself for science, never capitalises on his assets.
Freud makes sense of Leonardo’s tendency to find fault with his own work, his
slowness and hesitancy, by inferring the admiration that such a man felt before the
grandeur of the universe and the sense of insignificance and humility which would
cause him to forget his place in it. At the climax of the investigation, the artist would
survey the work and, overwhelmed by religious feeling, praise the greatness of God.

But Freud enlightens us quickly as to the true nature of this worship. Leonardo could hardly be further from orthodox Christianity. Despite his delicate sensibility, he appeared indifferent to good and evil, devised cruel offensive weapons, and sketched the terrified faces of criminals about to be executed. And Freud shows Leonardo to be atheistic in his challenging of the notion of a Universal deluge, and in his sceptical practice of praying to the saints. Freud cites the view that Leonardo removed the sacred figures from the vestiges of their connection with the Church, representing beautiful human emotions instead. If Leonardo’s religious feeling has nothing to do with piety, and less to do with Church dogma, it is actually in struggle with Christianity’s central figure of God the father. Freud is clear that Leonardo rebelled against his own father’s authority, and that quite naturally that would lead to a loss of belief in an exalted father figure in the form of God.

Leonardo’s praises for God’s greatness celebrated the sublime law of nature and the Creation. His religious ecstasies were reserved for the worship of a mother figure sublimated into the Universe. And Freud aligns himself to this form of mother-worship in his assertion at the end of the essay that ‘we all still show too little respect for Nature’.  

Leonardo’s continual striving for perfection, his humility, his neglect of his own interests, are all traits Freud is to describe later as elements of moral masochism. Leonardo’s vulture (or kite) fantasy would also place him in the camp of feminine masochism, since he takes up a passive position in relation to the bird, whose tail penetrates the baby’s mouth, in the dream which was to recur through his adult life.

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48 Ibid., p.231.
Awe of the mother produces a sublimation of sexual impulses that are then given an outlet at the level of intellectual and artistic endeavours which take the form of a worship of the maternal ideal. Leonardo’s (and Freud’s) atheism appears to mask a deeper maternal theism. So Leonardo nurses his boy pupils when they are ill as his mother nursed him. He paints the most powerful homage to femininity in the Mona Lisa, endowed with the blissful smile of motherhood, in a double gesture of rivalry with her maternal creativity and humble homage to her beauty and enigmatic power.

The power of intense maternal love may have been felt as unbearable. Just as, in the St Anne painting, the tiny lamb’s legs collapse beneath it, under the boy Christ’s weight, so, perhaps, the weight and strength of the mother’s feeling may be felt as crushing. Was Leonardo’s life spent in flight from and devotion to an excessively gentle, unbearably generous mother? The mother - infant relationship upon which Freud places such emphasis as the very embodiment of human love and the pinnacle of satisfaction, seems to be contaminated by feelings in the infant of fear and intolerable tension.

For Leo Bersani, this tension is what constitutes sexuality. Bersani’s reading of Freud produces a theory of masochism which removes it from its marginal position as one perversion among others and sets it at the centre of sexual and psychic life. Bersani’s reading of the Three Essays on Sexuality includes an elucidation of the theory of masochism which lies buried there. He is able to develop Freud’s own insights in a way that the psychoanalyst admitted he could not, for in the third essay he ruefully remarks that ‘everything relating to the problem of pleasure and unpleasure

49 Bersani, The Freudian Body.
touches upon one of the sorest spots of present-day psychology'. ⁵⁰ A footnote added in 1924 refers the reader to his attempt to solve the problem in his later essay on masochism: but not without reason, Bersani chooses to examine the profound implications of Freud's earlier remarks.

The centrality and all-embracing quality of masochistic response is indicated by Freud in his statement in the essay on infantile sexuality that all intense emotions, 'including even terrifying ones', ⁵¹ spill over into sexuality. He adds that many people actually seek to experience feelings of fright, apprehension, and horror, though often within the safe bindings of a novel or the safety of a theatre auditorium. And a similar erotogenic effect may be assumed to attach itself to feelings of intense pain. Supposedly negative or unpleasurable experiences, then, can be felt as pleasurable once they reach a level of intensity which renders them sexual. Sexual excitement results from any internal process in the organism which is registered at a sufficiently strong level.

But is sexual excitement clearly pleasurable? Freud considers it, in his essay on the transformations of puberty, to be a pleasurable feeling, but also involving urgency and tension, and a wish to make a change to the psychological situation. A component of something unpleasurable is integral to sexual desire. Bersani points out that this 'pleasurable unpleasurable' tension of sexual stimulation seeks not to be released but to be increased. ⁵² It attempts to prolong itself, so undermining Freud's positing of sexual desire as a kind of itch which seeks nothing better than its extinction or the discharge of tension.

⁵⁰ Freud, 'Three Essays on Sexuality', p. 129.
⁵¹ Ibid., p. 123.
⁵² Bersani, The Freudian Body, p. 34.
Bersani asks what it means to say that sexual pleasure is distinct from tension and if it may even be identical to a kind of pain. Is this, he asks, a problem of saying, of the dysfunctional relationship of our language to our body? The problem he refers to is crucial and is at the heart of any attempt to look at the complex of masochism, the sensibility which characterises it when it is most recognisable and the artistic and literary works through which it negotiates its haunting presence.

But to understand how an infant arrives at this moment requires a leap into the non-linguistic, into the mysterious time zone before speech, a moment only perhaps imaginable, only graspable through the image or the imagination, a moment to which Freud attempts to gain access through the painting of ‘St Anne with Two Others’ by Leonardo da Vinci.

What does Bersani mean by saying that Leonardo’s mother initiates him into sexuality by seducing him into ‘ontologically traumatic fantasy’? 53

One thing he means is that the moment of masochistic pleasure emerges on the level of fantasy. In Jean Laplanche’s discussion in Vie et mort en psychanalyse of sadomasochism, he puts forward four formulations through which he has found the subject to pass; ‘introjecter l’objet souffrant, fantasmer l’object souffrant, faire souffrir en soi l’objet, se faire souffrir soi-même’. 54 Laplanche considers the child’s relation to the adult to contain a fantasy of the adult’s intrusion. For Laplanche, this ‘rebroussement dans le fantasme’ 55 implies the dimension of interiority, allowing the possibility of an introjection, which, whether its content be pleasant or disagreeable, results in sexual excitement. The fantasmatic representation takes place within the

53 Ibid., p.43.
54 Laplanche, Vie et mort en psychanalyse, p.148.
55 Ibid.
visual field, in the imagination, and Laplanche emphasises the auto-eroticism of the masochistic impulses.

Bersani takes his cue from the ébranlement that Laplanche describes, to develop a notion of a subject perturbed or shattered into sexual excitement at the point where the psychic organisation breaks down from exposure to levels of stimuli greater than it can bind or neutralise. Sexuality is ‘that which is intolerable to the structured self’, and the infant is vulnerable to being shattered into a sexuality which is inherently masochistic. Masochism, in Bersani’s reading, is the ground of sexuality, not an individual aberration. Sadomasochistic activity has very little to do with what has become a founding moment in consciousness, a question of an intrapsychic event, a disrupted, ruptured interiority, and a self constructed only in readiness to be invaded.

Because self-shattering is the object of desire, narcissism is an integral component of this model, which seeks a kind of objectless jouissance. This is ‘originary sublimation’, an auto-eroticism only contingently attached to objects, in search of pure excitement, the ecstatic pain of being broken.

An openness to exterior stimulus could be thought of as an outward turning. Bersani talks of Baudelaire’s adoring movement outside of himself in Mon coeur mis à nu, his fusion with others, his inspiration, as a childlike response to the environment. The ground of cultural achievement, repressed by Freud and psychoanalysis, is this masochistic jouissance. The primary process Bersani is attempting to constitute from his readings of Freud is of developmental value, in infancy protecting the psyche against the overwhelming stimuli of the environment.

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57 Bersani, The Culture of Redemption, p.37.
58 Ibid., p.70.
Originary sublimation is the extension of enjoyment, and is differentiated from the process of idealisation or moral masochism, the transcendence of self-interest.

Idealisation, where the ego is ‘ordered to find pleasure in loving an ideal to which it is guiltily inferior’, represses sexual impulses. The parental figure introjected by the subject imposes itself upon the ego in a secondary form of intrapsychic sadomasochism. But Bersani thinks that there is a process by which sublimation follows idealisation, when the ego fulfils the demands of the ideal and therefore satisfies its narcissism. Idealisation is, then, part of the formula for cultural achievement, and Bersani points to this process at work in the self-completion of the artist, in Baudelaire’s essay on Constantin Guys.

If idealisation, or secondary masochism, were a detour within sublimation, or primary masochism, this might have implications in both the moral and the artistic fields. It would give insight into Leonardo’s trembling as he set himself to paint, and his outpourings of wondering emotion at the culmination of his scientific experiments. And it might offer an additional way of working against what Bersani calls the paranoia which forms the dominant social structure. He offers the idea of the father no longer acting as the inhibiting law, but as ‘the agent of an affectionately ironic generalising of the mother’s love’. The latter would be an extension outwards of a primary masochism which is already a turning outward. I would like to suggest that a detour through the verticality of idealisation, or moral masochism, may be an essential part of this process.

59 Ibid., p.40.
60 Ibid., p.47.
To work against the operations of paranoia means attempting to comprehend what has often been called incomprehensible, the tendency of societies to turn upon vulnerable communities and calculatedly kill their members in the name of racial purity, ethnic cleansing and so on. This is not to try to analyse fascism, but to suggest the idea of a kind of psychic vacuum and impoverishment in cultural symbolisations which may contribute to its lingering and septic presence. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, in their essay *Le mythe nazi* say that Germany was not only missing an identity, but lacking the ownership of the means to identification. If in German art there always had to be a great effort, the reason, for Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, was that what was at stake was their identity (or the vertigo of an absence of identity). The Nazi myth offered a dream with which Germans could identify themselves, while National Socialist ideology proposed the nation as an absolute, concrete, singular identity. A ready made populist myth of a powerful father to whom one can submit and who will make others suffer responds to the need for an identity by providing an exoskeleton, a shell of identity. The most obviously catastrophic result of this incapacity for the multiplicity of fantasy, this impoverishment of the imagination, is what Bersani calls a 'rageful aggressiveness' which under specific conditions becomes the genocidal mentality. A thwarted masochism throws death outside, unable to find a safe place to represent it in an interiority.

Subversion of the social structures which reflect and inflict this psychic malaise seems extremely important. Bersani's suggested route of the de-Oedipalisation of the father could lead to law and order being eroticised again in masochism and sadism as sexual practices. This morality of the boudoir would offer an open space to play with,

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61 Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *Le mythe nazi*.
invert and turn inside out the codes of crime and punishment. It would involve trust, humour and inventiveness, and allow cruelty and abjection to be acted out without fear of contempt, disapproval or resentment.

Bersani is suggesting something slightly different, in fact: a generalising of the mother’s love implies work on the cultural level, alternative symbolisations to reflect and illustrate a complex and rich psychic life capable of fluid and risky identifications. In this cultural work done itself upon the impulse of sublimation, as Freud has shown in his study of Leonardo, a detour in idealisation may be necessary, a kind of purgatorio, or journey through difficult terrain. The paranoia present from the start, within the infant and in external social relations could become a productive force in spurring the artist or thinker to higher levels of achievement. In this process, an introjected ideal, the Oedipal father, is enlisted in the service of symbolising the love of the Madonna for her child.

Bersani’s reading of Freud leads, as he points out, to a destruction of the ‘categorical clarities of any general psychology’. If Freud cannot tell us what he intended to, then how do we read Freud? And why should it have been a problem?

For Bersani, Freud’s importance is in his problematising of the act of knowing. The question goes back to Eve and the apple, to the loss of innocence and the discovery of one’s nakedness before God. But does Freud problematise his own immense inquiry into human subjectivity? What Freud presents, it can be argued, is a consciousness which for the most part conceals an originary wound, a wound then mapped onto the female body. The full recognition of death as a force in the human subject comes late, in Beyond the Pleasure Principle: its implications are not pursued. Psychoanalysis

63 Bersani, The Freudian Body, p. 89.
would need another language, would need to abandon itself to language, to hear what Bersani calls its own 'benificent discursive stammering'\textsuperscript{64} to move back from its compulsive drive to knowledge.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., p.31.
III. Femininity

How feminine is masochism? If women are masochistic, should we display it proudly, as O displays her branded bottom and labial ring, or hang our heads in shame and wish we were different, less complicated? If masochism is feminine in essence, as Krafft-Ebing asserts (‘a morbid degeneration of mental qualities specifically feminine’),\(^\text{65}\) as Freud thinks (‘an expression of the feminine nature’),\(^\text{66}\) why is it that all Krafft-Ebing’s case histories are of male masochists, why is it that male masochism consistently draws attention to its existence, heterosexual and homosexual? Does feminine masochism collude with a patriarchal social structure which oppresses women, as German feminist Frigga Haug thinks? ‘By female masochism’, she writes, ‘we understand actions which seem to be caused and sustained by self-hatred and which by their very existence compel us to assume that the majority of our sex takes pleasure in suffering.’\(^\text{67}\) And: ‘We must make efforts to free ourselves from the myth as well as the reality of women’s masochism.’\(^\text{68}\)

Is the cultural suppression of women’s voices and potential for self-development likely to be mitigated by a suppression in the name of feminism of a feminine desire, a narrowing of women’s sexual self-expression? Haug’s is a masculinist position which, under the guise of feminism, pours scorn upon her own sex. While offering a litany of the wrongs of wives, excluded from everything, from the temples of power to the right to rent rooms, she simultaneously insists that women choose their condition, and that

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\(^{67}\) Haug, *Beyond Female Masochism*, p.75.

\(^{68}\) Ibid., p.86.
oppression 'requires the connivance of the oppressed'. Among the reasons she gives for women choosing wifedom over a career, which reasons, she says, can be quite trivial, is that the woman in question 'does not have to get up so early in the morning'. She oscillates between a complaint that a more or less monolithic male-dominated society crushes women and one that women like being crushed.

Haug's picture is unsophisticated, her address condescending. But the argument that masochism is women's problem, that it results from male domination and underpins it, has been developed into a theory of psychosexual gender dynamics elsewhere, notably by Jessica Benjamin. In *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination*, Benjamin attempts to analyse the interplay between love and domination in order to uncover the roots of men's oppression of women in the psychic dualism of autonomy and dependency. Benjamin sees sadomasochism as a 'pure culture' of domination. Masochism, the voluntary submission to erotic domination, is a paradox in which the individual tries to achieve freedom through slavery, release through submission to control, she thinks.

Citing the example of Pauline Réage's *Histoire d'O*, Benjamin presents masochism as a search for recognition, for spiritual or psychological satisfaction, a search which must be staged within humiliation and abuse. Réage's heroine is prepared to submit to intense pain, risks the complete annihilation of her person, and what Benjamin calls 'the violent rupture of the self, a profound experience of fragmentation and chaos'.

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69 Ibid., p. 86.
70 Ibid., p. 9.
72 Ibid., p. 61.
How convincing is Benjamin’s study of Réage’s novel, the single source of her analysis of sadomasochistic fantasy? Does O have a great longing to be known, as Benjamin argues? Does she hope that in complete surrender she will find her elusive self? In performing the tasks set her, does she seek affirmation of herself? Is O, finally, what Benjamin considers her to be; a woman who desperately flees an internal sense of being outcast, who seeks through submission to punishment to be reached, to be able to experience another living presence?

A fundamental problem with Benjamin’s consideration of Réage’s novel is that it treats the character of O as if it were a real person. Benjamin fails to recognise that she is dealing with a literary text, not a case history, and a pornographic text in particular, one in which a crucial aim is the sexual stimulation of the reader. Benjamin imposes a three-dimensional psychology, imputes an inner life, to a mere figure or cipher - O is not even named as the other characters are, but is the very figuration of the invaded orifices she represents. She is without subjectivity or interiority precisely because that enables her to act as a screen upon which the reader can project his or her own. The character, like O herself, is there to be used. O’s feelings are almost never described. For example, the opening chapter tells of O’s abduction by René and her rape at Roissy in a narrative low on emotional response. Mainly physical sensations are reported from O’s point of view: the ‘uncomfortable feeling’ of her legs without stockings, or the way that the seat sticks to her naked thighs. The pornographic narrative insists on precise description of the instruments of punishment, reports the cool, contemptuous dialogue of the libertines, elaborates ritual and regulation. Not

only O’s sensibility, but even a description of her face and body are left out of the formula, the better for the reader to supply their absence.

A reading of *Histoire d’O* offers precious little evidence of any quest for self, for affirmation, for spiritual or psychological satisfaction, for grace, recognition, or freedom - all of which Benjamin considers O to be searching for. O is not actively impelled but passively submits, finding value in the immediate experience of her sufferings rather than any extension of selfhood. Benjamin’s dogged psychologising of a story which structurally blocks such analysis allows her to think of masochism as resulting from psychic pain, isolation, a sense of loss and abandonment. It hardly needs saying that Réage’s fiction nowhere mentions O’s family background, so Benjamin cannot go to it to prop up her argument, which sees masochism as feminine pathology resulting from a developmental impasse.

Her psychoanalytic explanation of feminine masochism is grounded on the conception of the girl’s difficulty in separating from her mother, who is not only an object of love but a mainstay of identity. In this account, girls protect the internalised mother as all good and all powerful. Benjamin argues that the fear of the master’s power in erotic domination takes the place of the deeper fear of separation from the mother. In submission, the masochist protects the internal other from damage by taking the fault and injury upon herself. The masochist is in flight from identification yet caught up in the inability to separate. The masochistic relation is entered into in an attempt ‘to overcome (the woman’s) clinging helplessness and separation anxiety even as she simultaneously expresses and gives way to it’. 74 The masochist is unable to unleash her aggression, for fear that the good internalised mother would be destroyed.

The need to escape from her mother is at war, Benjamin considers, with the
masochist’s need to turn back to her, to complete the struggle for recognition.

For Benjamin, girls replace their thwarted desire for recognition and need for agency
by ideal love, which accepts the other’s will and desire as one’s own: ‘We see in ideal
love a “perversion” of identification, a deformation of identificatory love into
submission,’ she writes.\textsuperscript{75} Masochistic love is surrogate love, in this analysis: it is the
mother that the masochist wants to get through to, not the sadist; surrender is a
substitute for struggle; dreams of death reflect a strong avidity for life; submission is
the ‘ever-ready look-alike’\textsuperscript{76} for surrender; violation is ‘false’ differentiation.\textsuperscript{77}

This account of an inauthentic feminine masochism has women searching for ‘a
desire of one’s own’,\textsuperscript{78} which is to be found in solitude. In this safe space, women can
discover a non-genitally oriented sensuality which derives pleasure from the erotic
potential of the whole body. This solitary eroticism offers a true sexual awakening.

If masochism is the problem, it appears that solitary masturbation may be the
solution, according to Benjamin. It is hard to read her description of this voyage of
self-discovery in any other way. One might want to object that what is being
discovered may turn out to be a desire for oneself rather than a desire of one’s own.
But a more fundamental objection would be that a desire, unlike a room, may not
necessarily or easily or uncomplicatedly be owned. Desire may not be proper to
anyone. We do not have to put forward Lacan’s statement that desire is always the
desire of the other to oppose Benjamin’s monadic proposition. The experience of

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., p.122.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., p.72, a reference to E. Ghent, ‘Masochism, Submission and Surrender’, Postdoctoral
Colloquium at New York University, Psychoanalysis Program, 1983.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., p.76.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., p.123.
isolation is no guarantee of sexual self-closure. Desire is the stuff of intersubjectivity: alterity cannot somehow be willed into non-existence, and it seems strange that a psychoanalyst should recommend it. This is not to deny value to feminine self-exploration in an unthreatening safe space. It is simply to consider such explorations as quite compatible with masochistic desires and practices, not in opposition to them.

In her theory of masochism as standing in for something else, working through substitution of physical pain for the psychic pain of loss and abandonment, Benjamin is close to the hypothesis of Masud Khan. In his essay ‘From masochism to psychic pain’ in Alienation in Perversions, Khan proposes that masochism is ‘a special variant of manic defence that the ego uses for holding together the self from a psychic pain that threatens to annihilate it’. J. B. Pontalis in his essay ‘La douleur (psychique)’ takes a similar line, asking if the function of some suffering is not to evacuate psychic pain: ‘Souffrir beaucoup - là où il faut et le temps qu’il faut - pour ne pas souffrir trop, et à jamais?’

These analysts are suggesting that masochistic suffering is somehow insincere, a physical staging of an emotional trauma, which is for both Pontalis’s and Khan’s analysands the impossibility of mourning. Khan’s patient, after six months of analysis, is able to say the words, ‘I am in pain’, and this statement is the key to her cure. The truth of the matter is finally revealed by the words, I am in pain. The suffering of the masochist is not truthful: it takes the place of a direct, authentic statement of psychic pain. These accounts see masochism as a kind of bluffing, a defence, a disguised expression of separation anxiety, an overflow channel for psychic pain. All that is

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79 Khan, Alienation in Perversions.
80 Ibid., p.212.
81 Pontalis, Entre le rêve et la douleur, p.267.
82 Khan, Alienation in Perversions, p.211.
needed is for the masochist, the analysand, to recognise the true state of things, to recognize what the analyst has already understood. Where the omnipotent sadist inflicted punishment, the omniscient analyst offers the truth of trauma.

But the truth, like desire, may not be something one can own. The words ‘I am in pain’ have the power to move the listener because, perhaps, these words could be uttered by anyone. Psychic pain may have its roots in trauma, in the incapacity to mourn, but the roots may go deeper, it may be a condition of existence to have psychic pain. The most irreducible form of such pain is an innate knowledge of one’s mortality, of the stunted inadequacy of a single lifetime and the realisation of limited capacities of apprehension and this may not be dealt with or alleviated by psychotherapy. What is beyond the pleasure principle - the death drive - is the bedrock of such pain, defying analysis, resisting cure.

It is suggested that Haug’s and Benjamin’s treatment of feminine masochism continues the pathologising of masochism instigated by Krafft-Ebing and repeated by Freud. But their arguments are in another sense quite different, in linking the pathology to men’s oppression of women. While Benjamin’s work is propelled forward in the name of feminism, her deeper assumptions - that women’s masochism indicates psychological ill health resulting from developmental trauma, that it is inauthentic, valueless and colludes with patriarchal oppression - does women no favours, offering a spurious way out through ideologically correct sexual practices.

Benjamin implicitly makes women responsible for a supposed collusion with male domination, where a clearer target would be the agents of that domination: those men who oppress women. (On this question, I consider Benjamin’s picture of the problems of masculine identity formation to be valuable: for further reference to this, see chapter
four.) A second problem with Benjamin's approach is her indifference to the specificity of the erotic, which she treats as replicating existing dominant/submissive roles. It may be the reverse: that particularly powerful and successful individuals turn to masochism as a means to re-experience powerlessness. More importantly, while male violence is a stark reality, consensual sadomasochism offers a space in which lethal psychological forces can be acted out, played out, defused and transformed. Finally, all three psychoanalysts, Benjamin, Khan, and Pontalis, can be criticised over their notions of truth, which I would characterise as puritanical. Art and fantasy, rhetoric and drama articulate truth, and the truth may and does include fiction and untruth. This inclusive truth offers, not a verifiable, irreducible version of experience, but a means of recognising, conceptualising and narrating the raw material of a life. The illustrative and curious nature of literature, which stays one step away from diagnosis, operating with more fluid and anarchic strategies, make it a more humble project, though simultaneously more wide ranging than psychoanalysis, its rival in representing subjectivity. In this sense, literature halts before the quest for knowledge, attempts momentary, transient encapsulations rather than definitive accounts. Feminine desire may, then, be better understood by articulations close to or within the literary.
IV. Love's torment

There is a psychoanalysis which moves closer to art than to science, constituting its project as description, portrayal. The Jungian work of James Hillman\(^83\) and Lyn Cowan\(^84\) rejects the dominant tendency to labelling and pathologising when it comes to masochism. I want to show how they offer some clues for an enquiry into masochism.

‘Deep within the soul,’ writes Cowan, ‘in hidden invisible currents, there is a movement toward death, toward depth, toward essence. It may be that this movement is more obvious in masochists.’\(^85\) For Cowan and Hillman, masochism’s source is not only in a past but in the future death of the subject. For Hillman, its origins are not particular, local or even sexual; it is an experience of death which is valuable to the soul. Not only is masochism not a pathology for these thinkers, it is a movement in itself toward psychic health, giving the self a more solid foundation than was previously possible, through submission to a process of mortificatio. It is a question of getting down into the dirt, recognising one’s animality, the dark, perverse aspects of one’s nature, and those aspects one would usually rather forget about: inadequacy, vulnerability, lack. Cowan notes that the masochist is likely to be successful, professionally and emotionally, with a strong ethical sense. For such people, masochism offers a salutary movement away from egocentricity, a much-needed reminder of the deeper realities.

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\(^83\) Hillman, The Essential James Hillman.

\(^84\) Cowan, Masochism.

\(^85\) Ibid., p.71
Hillman considers love, Eros, to have its origins in chaos, the inchoate sludge of human nature. This chaos is inseparable from creativity. We are a long way from Krafft-Ebing’s relentless cataloguing or Freud’s references to infantile regression. For Hillman, the prerequisite is to bring Eros to ‘all psychic contents whatsoever - symptoms, moods, images, habits,’ and to find them all lovable and desirable in a fundamental sense. Love and torture are close companions, and Hillman cites the myth of Eros wounding Psyche to illustrate the inevitability of love’s torment. The suffering of the soul in love is a devotional discipline, which moves towards psychic integration and erotic identity. Hillman draws attention to the centrality of this suffering of love, the fact that passion may mean more to an individual than familial difficulty or conscious development. A masochistic element, then, is crucial to love, and love’s passionate self-mortification a mystery at the heart of life. This is the paradox of masochism, which Hillman describes as ‘something the soul wants and needs and which it receives through the discovery of an intense, overwhelming value of the flesh and its exquisite enjoyment, which is also our worst pain’. Masochism transcends pleasure and pain, conjoins opposites, and in this sense is a remarkable achievement in terms of symbolisation. The potential vision masochism has to offer is anti-heroic, indeed fatalistic: that we ‘need to learn how to suffer painful complexes and complexities more than to eliminate them’. Masochism brings depth, a depth which is characterised by humiliation in sexual subjection, humility in the emotional posture.

James Hillman’s description of the bringing of Eros to all psychic manifestations and moods as an aim of integration towards which his psychoanalysis moves seems to be

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close to a Freudian description of sublimation. Hillman’s work sublimates, bringing a higher value to the lowest of psychic processes. Where Freud secularised, choosing Leonardo as an exemplary painter for his human depictions of religious subjects, Hillman refers frequently to the soul, the sacred, the figure of Christ, the divine.

Cowan, too, focuses on religion and Christianity in particular, linking masochism to the mortificatio experiences of suffering, repentance, atonement and sacrifice as profoundly important and meaningful to the soul. In the image of Christ crucified, we confront a redemption through pathos: ‘the imitatio Christi is a call not to punishment but to suffering.’\(^89\) Masochism embodies a religious devotion to suffering, and also makes sexuality itself a sacrament, bringing the body and soul together.

‘If Passion mysticism - the mysticism of the cross and its stations, of the stigmata and the bleeding heart, of the flayed martyrs and the flagellants - becomes masochism we have, by naming this after Masoch, turned passion into pornography,’\(^90\) writes James Hillman. The two categories are not mutually exclusive, however. It is not a question of reversing this reductive operation, but of discovering a mutual dynamism between spiritual aspiration and animal necessity, rather than subscribing to a tired, static hierarchy of values. The latter inadequately represents subjectivity in its complex reversals, its redoublings, its seemingly futile manoeuvrings that explicate all the hapless exposure of a life.

\(^89\) Cowan, p.25.
CHAPTER TWO

I. Pure Feeling

If, as I have argued, psychoanalysis can touch upon the truth of masochism only at its most universalising moment, if masochism is hard to account for, could this be due less to the paradoxical nature of the tendency than to its ubiquity, its generality? Even the superhuman energies of a Freud might be overawed by the enormity of the task, hardly less than the embracing of all psychic pain, at least if one follows Masud Khan’s view.

The latter writes that: ‘Over the past two centuries and more, with the increasing disappearance of God as the witnessing other...the experience of psychic pain has changed from tolerated and accepted suffering to its pathological substitutes, and the need has rapidly increased for psychotherapeutic interventions to alleviate these pathological masochistic states. All symptom-formations are masochistic in an essential measure...’

Khan is suggesting that in religious communities, suffering may be integrated, due to the sense of its being witnessed by a caring and compassionate God. Once belief in God’s presence breaks down, suffering loses all value, becoming a mere pathology to be surmounted by the individual, who may now contract another individual, the psychoanalyst, to act as witness. In this view, psychoanalysis represents a secular priesthood, a position articulated differently by Foucault, who emphasises the disciplinarian element of confessional practices. But while psychoanalysis in this view inherits some of the features of Christianity as an institution, I want to argue in this chapter that a theology faced with its extinction in modernity has shown itself capable of

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2. Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I*. 
rethinking relations between the sacred and the profane, at a point where psychoanalysis has lost sight of one end of the spectrum.

Psychoanalytic accounts of religion argue for a pre-given subjective reality upon which faith builds a kind of symbolic superstructure. In *Au commencement était l'amour: psychanalyse et foi*, Julia Kristeva writes: ‘Le christianisme est la religion qui a le mieux déplié l'impact symbolique et corporel de la fonction paternelle sur l’être humain.’ Kristeva characterises Christianity as a form of family romance in disguise. The fantasmatic content of the Catholic Credo is revealed as ‘la réalité psychique’ of the analysand. Loyalty to the all-powerful father is what allows the child to enter the symbolic order and language itself. The fusion between father and son is shown to be a sublime homosexuality. For Kristeva, the unconscious implications of the Passion of Christ are that it brings to light a fundamental depression in the human subject, which begins in babyhood, when the maternal paradise is renounced. The mother and the immediate satisfaction of demands with which she is associated must be given up in order for the infant to be accepted into the order of the father, and of speech. This evolutionary moment unlocks a melancholic anguish which never leaves the subject. ‘Le Christ abandonné, le Christ en enfer, figure certes le partage par Dieu de la condition du pécheur. Mais il offre aussi le récit de cette mélancolie essentielle, au-delà de laquelle l’être humain peut, éventuellement, retrouver un autre, désormais interlocuteur symbolique et non pas sein nourricier.’ If each subject suffers from a constitutive melancholia, symbolised by Christ’s Passion, it is due to the evolutionary necessity to move away from the mother’s breast to

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4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., p.57.
the father's language. Christ abandoned on the cross is a symbolisation of the separation from maternal goodness.

Kristeva's account is of a Christianity which appears as a rather transparent children's story. Indeed, hers is hardly an analysis, more of a translation of one conceptual framework, that of Christianity, by another, psychoanalysis. Psychic reality is considered to lie behind religion. She meticulously replaces each theological conception by a psychoanalytic one, so that even the Trinity can be re-articulated as 'le glissement de la vie psychique dans le noeud de trois registres intriqués du symbolique, de l'imaginaire et du réel'. The Church, which nurtures believers as a mother does her baby, is propped up by psychic processes which gratify their narcissism. The individual capable of speech replaces this model of dependency. She follows Freud in considering religion as an illusion and in the nostalgia for the mother which in her thought is the origin of human despair.

The notions of psychic reality as a kind of bedrock and of the centrality of the family in producing the human subject are historically recent. In the way that Kristeva deploys them here, they abolish all other representations, defining all institutions and representational projects in their own terms. This terrifying totalitarianism is thinkable as an extreme manifestation of a project first begun by protestant theology. Mark C Taylor, in Erring, argues that what he calls 'modern humanistic atheism' - the denial of God in the name of man - is closely tied to Reformation theology. Luther argued for a personal relationship with God and the doctrine of pro nobis, the significance of Christ being

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6 Ibid., p.59.
7 Taylor, Erring, p.20.
crucified for us. Luther’s work emphasised the sense of human concerns lying at the centre of divine purpose. But Luther’s foregrounding of the human also ultimately led to the transformation of theology into anthropology, according to Taylor, where man is defined as subject and all else as object, including God.

What is at stake in this revolt of the enlightened against irrational belief and repression is intellectual and political freedom, independence and autonomy. In the sexual domain it is, I would argue, the work of the Marquis de Sade, *le divin Marquis*, which makes explicit the fantasy content of the Enlightenment project in the figure of the libertine. For this reason alone, the sadistic sensibility is not comparable to the masochistic, as I will attempt to show in the following chapter. To return to Taylor’s exposition, in his account, those who are struggling to assert their right to absolute selfhood experience God as death. The death of God enacted or, as radical theologian Thomas Altizer asserts, willed in humanistic atheism actually represents an effort to deny death, and ‘the death of the sovereign God now appears to be the birth of the sovereign self’.\(^8\) The quest for control and domination grows out of this self-centred perspective.

The antagonism between such a perspective and a religious one is underlined by Altizer: ‘Religion must necessarily direct itself against a selfhood, a history, or a cosmos that exists immediately and autonomously as its own creation or ground.’\(^9\) Altizer says that to exist in our time is to exist ‘in a chaos freed of every semblance of cosmological meaning or order.’\(^10\) This is a world saturated with knowledge, willed towards it, but

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\(^8\) Ibid., p.25.


deprived of transcendence. Modernity, he says, and modern philosophy in particular, is not religiously neutral, but grounded in a dialectical negation of faith. Kierkegaard, according to Altizer, recognised the 'radically profane' ground of modern knowledge, and opposed it to a faith now become subjective, transient, paradoxical. This religious thought detached from religious certainty, this marginal theology, has much to offer as an alternative thinking on the meaning of suffering, or why suffering is meaningful. Kierkegaard maintains the sense of suffering as sickness, but within a Christian framework the capacity for this sickness is what marks the difference between people and animals. For Kierkegaard there are temporal forms of suffering, which include hardship, grief, adversity and so on, which, though they horrify the natural man, can be faced by the Christian. What the Christian fears is the 'sickness unto death', a despair which does not result in physical death but is a sickness of the spirit. Although the possibility of this sickness 'bespeaks the infinite erectness of his being spirit' and is an ascending movement, actually being in despair is a descent from merit.

Kierkegaard’s language, his whole conceptual framework, contrast with the language and theoretical foundations of psychoanalysis. For the Christian philosopher, there is no question of any verification of a hypothesis through empirical observation, no biological foundation for human behaviour. The self is not formed through the complex interaction of pre-given dispositions with an external world: it is spirit. For Kierkegaard, there is, aside from his animal nature, 'something eternal in a man'. For him, a human being is not necessarily a self. It is essential to move towards selfhood and individuality. Without

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11 Ibid., p. 103.
this conscious and willed contemplation of one's own acts one remains lacking in personal integrity: and where in Freud an over-sensitive conscience was symptomatic of moral masochism, for Kierkegaard, it must be heard: the course of a life is to be understood in the light of the eternal, the infinite.

Kierkegaard's thinking privileges suffering and self-mortification as a means to develop individuality, one that is radically opposed to the egocentric autonomy of the secular subject in pursuit of pleasure and control. The named, acquisitive free person disappears within what Mark C. Taylor, following in Kierkegaard's footsteps, calls the 'anonymity of the divine milieu',14 where man can no longer exist at the centre of his world. In this milieu, 'communicants inevitably suffer... those who suffer within this generative/destructive field never suffer alone. Pathos does not simply isolate and separate; it also ties and binds. Since subjects are primordially relational, passion is really compassion.'15 All the elements of masochism are here: masochism metaphorises them, in its potentially lethal cruelty, potentially life-creating sexuality, its dramatising of suffering and conflict, its literal bondage. Taylor asserts the incurability of the subject, where death is no longer seen as outside, but within. The denial of death is the worst possible malaise, while its recognition can lift away the burden of seriousness attendant on defending life. In this perspective, loss is also central to experience, and not purely as tragedy. Dispossession is our real estate in the world, the sacrifice of self and the disintegration of its defensive borders offer us crucial insights and joyful experience. 'Since delight always involves loss, the joy it brings is inevitably an anguished joy.'16 Alongside this argument, I

15 Ibid., p.142.
16 Ibid., p.147.
would want to say that suffering may offer an essential value, an experience of moral and spiritual struggle and purification, a cherished inner sanctuary, an imaginative possibility. To value one’s suffering is, then, neither perverse, meaningless or sanctimonious. It can be a turn towards integrity, a way of relocating a sense of self.

One of the things Taylor appears to be doing is offering ways of living out Altizer’s dialectic between the profane and the sacred, a dialectic instituted by the Incarnation of Christ on earth. Altizer sees the task of the contemporary theologian as a quest for a religionless Christianity, one open to history, which would see the actual processes of time and space as the arena for redemption. For Altizer, Christ’s Incarnation must be a continual process of spirit becoming flesh, of Eternity becoming time, or of the sacred becoming profane.17 Altizer’s Christianity celebrates the Incarnation as a real event culminating in an actual transformation of the world. For him, the dialectic between sacred and profane leads to a dynamic, forward movement of Kierkegaardian repetition. ‘The movement of repetition,’ says Altizer, ‘embodies the present and actual becoming of an existence which has been.’18 The forward movement of repetition leads to a coincidentia oppositorum where, but not until the End, flesh and spirit will become identical: ‘repetition is a forward movement to the End’.

This perspective can help to situate the masochistic experience and sensibility. As we saw in the previous chapter, Freudian psychoanalysis quailed before the recognition of the centrality of suffering. J.-B. Pontalis explained its reticence by the fear that such recognition could turn into an apology for pain, ‘une valorisation excessive d’un pur

18 Ibid. p.155.
19 Ibid.
éprouvé, impensable et indicible... (une) religion salvatrice par l’agonie'.

Starting from a radical Christian perspective, masochism is thinkable as a marriage of flesh with spirit in which both are negated: the consequence being a real transformation in the here and now, but which repeats an End which has yet to come.

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II. A Consuming Fire

Masochism as a religious attitude may have expressed itself in a number of disguised forms throughout the century, responding, like sexual masochism, to an undeniable need. The figure of Simone Weil exemplifies moral masochism at its most impressive: controversial, unstoppable. She was 15 when Freud published ‘The Economic Problem of Masochism’ in 1924 and already nearly half-way through a short but incandescent life, which was to end at the age of 34. She, too, was concerned with economic problems, as a socialist militant whose books, especially *L’Enracinement* and *La condition ouvrière*, argued for a utopian social and economic order. She has also been described as pathologically masochistic. Like Freud, Weil was a middle-class Jew. Like him, she came to England to escape Hitler’s persecutions, and died here. Both thinkers share an iconoclastic, rigorous and wide-ranging perspective: but where Freud divides himself off from his object of enquiry, human pathology, Weil engages with hers, living out her identification with oppressed, suffering people. Since this engagement did take place both on the level of her published work and of the devotion of a life to her vision, I shall look here at both the key text for my concerns, *La pesanteur et la grâce* (1947), and at biographical material. George Steiner quotes De Gaulle, who was, according to him, ‘a masterly judge of human beings’, as declaring ‘the woman was mad’; he uses the terms pathology and pathological repeatedly to describe Weil, in lines such as: ‘Weil’s intimates were shocked by her confessed envy of the physical agonies of Christ, by her wish to emulate the passion. However concordant it may be with a mystical tradition of holy

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21 Weil, *La pesanteur et la grâce*. 
maceration, such a sentiment lies at the shadow-line of the pathological.'²² My view of her is rather as an extremist in the best possible cause: Weil never lost touch with reality or suffered delusions, she remained in touch, communicating, to the end.

'Lessembler à Dieu, mais à Dieu crucifié.'²³ What is striking about this line from Weil is the second clause of the sentence which both elucidates the first and half undoes it. To be godlike, to resemble God, appears to be self-inflation to the level of omnipotence, omniscience, the grandeur of God. The instant, backward-glancing presentation of God as Christ crucified is a shocking one on two levels: firstly in that we are asked to aspire, still an upward gesture, but now one robbed of all inflation, a movement of pure verticality, to this dying, agonised position; and secondly, in that Weil is reminding us that Christ as one part of the Trinity is also God, and it is the dying son, not the powerful Father, that we are to emulate, in Weil’s thought.

Suffering, for Weil, is a key point of access to the divine. The incarnation of Christ allows a rapprochement between the divine and the human, between categories divided from each other in an essential sense: 'en notre être, Dieu est déchiré. Nous sommes la crucifixion de Dieu... l’amour mutuelle de Dieu et de l’homme est souffrance.'²⁴ Desolation and despair, bitterness and suffering are all to be accepted, and indeed offer a privileged path towards the love of God.

²² Steiner, 'Sainte Simone', p. 4.
²³ Weil, La pesanteur et la grâce, p. 105.
²⁴ Ibid.
‘La douleur rédemptrice est ce par quoi le mal a réellement la plénitude de l’être dans toute la mesure où il peut la recevoir. Par la douleur rédemptrice, Dieu est présent dans le mal extrême.\textsuperscript{25}

Weil’s mysticism is clearly marked here, and in her life she felt that at certain moments she had experienced the divine. To describe the sense of visitation she refers to the Greek myth of Persephone who, having eaten the seeds of the pomegranate must remain in the underworld with Hades, who abducted her, for six months of each year. Weil writes: ‘she had fallen into the hands of the living God. When she left him she had eaten the grain of the pomegranate which linked her with him forever.’\textsuperscript{26} The reference is interesting, not least because of the resemblance between the juice of the pomegranate and blood: a violation is implied, but one which is sweet, sensual, fruitful. However Weil’s mysticism did not go in for any hallucination of God’s presence in a perceptible form. It involved the entry into a spiritual plane, a dimension completely other than the human. This, in a sense, is what she means by God or where God is to be found. God is ultimately the source of all meaning, all value, apart from the earth yet to be found in it if one is prepared to suffer, to renounce one’s power, to listen carefully to what others say, to put oneself in direct physical contact with the world, to be bound by obligation.

Weil committed herself to this uncompromising programme of moral masochism. With a kind of pure fanaticism to know what it was to be a worker, she took on factory work and did dangerous and dismal shifts in a steel foundry. She deliberately put herself on the receiving end of an oppressive economic and social system, so that she could experience it

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., p.36.
\textsuperscript{26} Weil, Attente de Dieu, p. 152.
in both mind and body, directly for herself. This experience impressed upon her the soul-
destroying nature of factory work, due not only to economic exploitation but also to the
bullying of workers by line managers and the lack of meaning attached to the tasks
performed. Weil was not naïve: from these experiences, which involved her in sharing the
misery of the exploited classes, she developed a vision of a non-materialist socialism which
she described in her books. She repeatedly put herself in the firing line, and it was part and
parcel of her personal and political programme to do so: in participating in the agony of
the oppressed, she could come closer to the divine and in imitating Christ on the cross she
could be purified by the bitterness of suffering. In moving down, an upward gesture was
implied: ‘Levier. Abaisser, quand on veut elever.’ 27 Again: ‘Quand l’univers pèse tout
entier sur nous, il n’y a pas d’autre contre-poids que Dieu lui-même... la croix est une
balance où un corps frêle et léger, mais qui était Dieu, a soulevé le poids du monde
entier.’ 28

In this second quotation, Weil opposes the weight of a material universe to a spiritual
body, the figure of Christ, a frail, light body. The dichotomy between spirit and flesh is a
familiar enough one, yet what she does with it is less usual. It becomes the foundation for
a moral dynamics located in the body which, as the body, imitates the dying Christ. In the
above quotation she insists on Christ’s body being thin and light. Robert Coles, in his
biography of Weil, investigates her lifelong tendency to deprive herself of food. 29 As a
child of five she refused to eat sugar, arguing that the French soldiers fighting the Germans
had none: as a young woman she decided to eat no more than people who had to live on

28 Ibid., p. 110.
29 Coles, Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage, chapter two, ‘Her Hunger’.
unemployment allowance: arriving in New York in flight from the occupation, she told her parents she would restrict her food to the same meagre rations as many French people had. Finally, dying of tuberculosis in England, she refused to eat the extra rations that might have saved her life. Coles, a professor of psychiatry, asks for help from Anna Freud in trying to determine whether or not Weil was anorectic. He cites her response: ‘...Simone Weil doesn’t seem to have had any delusions of obesity... the only way we can know that she didn’t really fear obesity, like all other anorectics would be to... see what her mind keeps doing with her own ideas and metaphors and similes... I don’t think we ought to call her anything clinical, only read her essays and letters and try to figure out what kept pushing its way into her mind...’

What was it that kept pushing its way into Simone Weil’s mind? Certainly not her own attractiveness. She could hardly be further from the coquette. In photographs she appears as a fresh-faced bluestocking who, with the minimum application of feminine artifice, could have passed as pretty. But she felt herself to be plain and despised narcissism, only putting on make-up with the help of a friend when she had been unsuccessful in getting factory work...she was hired at the succeeding interview.

Simone Weil did not define herself as a woman to whom men could condescend. She was intellectually sophisticated and sexually puritanical, having taken a vow of chastity at the age of 16. The deprivation of food that she imposed upon herself was consistent with her other masochistically self-denying actions and was central to her construction of the relations between the world, God and herself, her continual rejection of the law of gravity. To deny herself, in effacement, allowed a space for God to enter, for her to exist in God.

30 Ibid., p.28.
She describes this in a striking simile: ‘Ce que le crayon est pour moi quand, les yeux fermés, je palpe la table avec la pointe - être cela pour le Christ.’

Renunciation, already a key Christian concept, is developed by her still further, so that, for example, God is seen as loving the consent by which his creatures move back in order to allow him to pass through them. The extent to which a being can say ‘I’ is equal to the extent that God is deprived of participating in that being’s contacts with the world. The extremity of renunciation that God requires from Simone Weil, however, seems to be given a strongly psychical inflection in the closing paragraph of the section in *La pesanteur et la grâce* which is entitled ‘Effacement’: ‘Quand je suis quelque part, je souille le silence du ciel et de la terre par ma respiration et le battement de mon coeur.’ The sheer physicality of her existence, the unavoidable need to breathe and for one’s heart to beat, she sees as contaminating the purity of the sky and earth. The sentence smacks of self-loathing, a detestation of self beyond any rationale of spiritual renunciation - a horror of the necessity of inhabiting the flesh and a desire for death.

I would see Weil’s refusal of food as a logical outcome of her linking of weight, gravity, with materiality, grace or divinity with light and lightness. ‘Il n’y a qu’une faute: ne pas avoir la capacité de se nourrir de lumière.’

To repeat the question posed by Anna Freud, what was it, then, that kept pushing its way into Simone Weil’s mind? She frequently refers to food, to hunger, as a metaphor for all of the natural things which force their necessity upon us, thus depriving us of the capacity to live supernaturally, in a state of grace. Desire and love are placed within this

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32 Ibid., p. 53.
33 Ibid., p. 10.
framework: ‘Tous les désirs sont contradictoires comme celui de la nourriture. Je voudrais que celui que j’aime m’aime. Mais s’il m’est totalement dévoué il n’existe plus, et je cesse de l’aimer. Et tant qu’il ne m’est pas totalement dévoué, il ne m’aime pas assez. Faim et rassasiement.’

The most basic human needs, for love and for food, our creaturely necessities, are for Weil the stumbling block, hobbling us to temporality, attaching us to relative and finite goods when we aspire to higher things, to grace. Coles describes Weil as seeming bored with the ‘moral infractions we all commit’ and says that ‘her conscience reached for an absolutism utterly unqualified’. It was as if, says Coles, ‘an intense fire burned in her and made her struggle restlessly’. Strange, that Simone Weil died from what was generally known as consumption, because it is as if she were really consumed: ‘For our God’, according to Hebrews 12:29, ‘is a consuming fire.’ The masochist burns with the love of God, even when this God is not named or known, only present, in Weil’s thought, in the trace of his absence from the world. It was an absence she coveted for herself.

Weil was in touch with a death instinct that Sigmund Freud had found to precede all other drives - the desire to return to the state before life. For him this meant the inorganic state, pure and simple: for mystics like Weil it was a release from the imprisonment of mortality. Her life, driven by a sublimatory masochism, is all the more extraordinary and productive for its departure from the human law of self preservation.

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34 Ibid., p. 165.
35 Coles, Simone Weil, p. 39.
36 Ibid., p. 35.
37 The Holy Bible, p. 212.
38 Susan Sontag writes: ‘in the respect we pay to such lives, we acknowledge the presence of mystery in the world - and mystery is just what the secure possession of the truth, an objective truth, denies. In this sense, all truth is superficial; and some (but not all) distortions of the truth, some (but not all) insanity,
The aspiration to a state of grace is a religious or moral one: the perception of gracefulness is bound to the aesthetic, to art. How much can Weil’s thought offer us on questions of literature and art? On this level she is uncontroversial. She places Gregorian chant at the top of the list, favours Greek temples, Leonardo da Vinci and Bach, while Shakespeare’s tragedies are second-rate, she thinks, except Lear. When she retires from pressing her point and writes more reflectively in her better style, which is telegraphic, clear-sighted, delicate, she comes close to expressing a masochistic response to poetry: ‘Poésie: douleur et joie impossible. Touche poignante, nostalgie. Telle est la poésie provençale et anglaise. Une joie qui, à force d’être pure et sans mélange, fait mal. Une douleur qui, à force d’être pure et sans mélange, apaise.’

Purity in poetry allows it to touch deeply, to perform an alchemy of the spirit in which contradictions, oppositions, are brought together, fused in a joy so extreme as to be painful, or a grief brimming over into tranquillity. This potential to paradoxically reconcile pain and pleasure, agony and bliss, was referred to earlier by James Hillman as a defining characteristic of masochism. Now what he calls in psychical terms a remarkable achievement can be seen as a defining characteristic of poetry. Simone Weil was no aesthete, though she lived her life somewhat as Leonardo da Vinci painted, in intense sublimation and in despair of ever being good enough. In that sense, while the author is supposed to have died perhaps a little later on during this century than God did, and Weil

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some (but not all) unhealthiness, some (but not all) denials of life are life-giving, sanity producing, health creating and life enhancing. ‘Simone Weil’.

39 Weil, La Pesanteur et la grâce, p. 169.
40 Ibid., p. 170.
41 See chapter one.
herself thought a work of art had ‘quelque chose d’essentiellement anonyme’42 about it,
her own œuvre testifies to the mark of a very particular psyche.

42 La pesanteur, p. 169.
III. The Reinvention of God

But why this digression into theology? Do we really need to look at the radical theologians’ interpretation of the significance of the Incarnation of Christ in order to comprehend why pain can be felt as pleasure? Do we need to study Simone Weil’s inner world to link masochism to mysticism? And why, further to these enquiries, is it necessary to refer to another twentieth century religious thinker, Miguel de Unamuno, the Basque-Castilian Catholic rector of the University of Salamanca and author of numerous acclaimed Spanish works of fiction and theology?43

One important reason results from the rather painful spot that masochism represents in contemporary thought: it is the point sensible or Achilles heel of an individualist, competitive culture, a world which has less and less time for the loser, one for which death tends to be represented as external threat rather than internal necessity. Acknowledgement of other psychic spaces, of a more masochistic sensibility allows us to investigate another current of thought, one which runs through these times like an underground stream, carried by and explicated by a theology which recognises that God is, if not dead, distinctly elusive. The mysticism of a Weil, the affective battery of an Unamuno contradict any flat denial of God’s existence. Both insist on an experience of a living God through the body, an experience felt personally. But while Weil’s metaphysics are of a curbing or denial of the body, in aspiration to the soul’s release, Unamuno’s full-blooded Catholicism intricates body and soul inseparably.

43 The theological texts referred to here are: Unamuno, The Tragic Sense of Life: The Agony of Christianity, and Essays on Faith.
‘It is my living body,’ writes Unamuno, ‘that thinks, wills and feels.’ In this he argues explicitly against both the Scholastic antecedents of St Thomas Aquinas, in whose proposition the soul has an incorruptible substantiality, and against the spiritualist psychology of William James, which believed that body and soul were divisible. Unamuno attacks notions of man which generalise or rationalise him, insisting upon the actual lived existence of whichever thinker he refers to. Philosophers and theologians are men of flesh and blood: Kant, James, Spinoza, are all to be understood in this sense, in the person who is born, suffers and dies: ‘above all, who dies’. Unamuno’s works, saturated with feeling, comment on the personal qualities of those whose works he engages with, and evidently cherishes. William James is serious and ‘sincerely and deeply religious in spirit’; there are ‘profound currents of passion’ circulating beneath Spinoza’s Ethics or Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason. Each of these men, and each person, has an individual consciousness, which is Unamuno’s definition of a soul, and which he sees as substantially distinct from other phenomena.

What kind of thing, then, is the soul, for Unamuno? Anthony Kerrigan’s introduction to The Tragic Sense of Life compares a statement by Simone Weil on the soul to one by Unamuno. Hers is a model of cool sublimation: ‘The aim of life is to structure an architecture within the soul.’ Unamuno’s counterpoint is blunter: ‘The finality of life is to make oneself a soul.’ The soul, then, is something on which a life is staked. It is

44 Unamuno, The Tragic Sense of Life, p.93.
45 Ibid., p.3.
46 Ibid., p.193.
47 Ibid., p.90.
49 Ibid.
something that both Weil and Unamuno consider needs to be worked on, built, made: that is what a life is for. People overvalue life, says Unamuno, when they do not believe in the spirit, 'in whose service life should be'.\textsuperscript{50} If the soul or the individual consciousness is the reason for life, it must logically derive from some other category...death, perhaps? The recognition of transience and of one's mortality is, indeed, central. This insight also involves a consciousness of one's limitations.\textsuperscript{51} In reading Weil's and Unamuno's statements one feels the haunting presence of a third: Freud's, in \textit{Beyond the Pleasure Principle}, that 'the aim of all life is death'.\textsuperscript{52} The incommensurability of this celebrated insight with that of the religious thinkers lies in the fact that death comes as the end, for a rationalist like Freud: it is a simple stoppage. For the two doubting believers, the conception of death allows another kind of life to be realised, another kind of thought, action or art to be valued.

Unamuno's discourse is an excessive but salutary attack on health, wealth and happiness, one which emphasises mortality and its consequences. How is it that the soul can be built, how can the individual consciousness come to recognise and comprehend its own mortality? This is achieved through suffering, according to Unamuno.\textsuperscript{53} One turns inwards only through suffering. It is revelatory: suffering tells us that we exist, he thinks. Suffering is what we feel in the immediate, palpable reality, in our bodies, and he suggests that our bodies may have as their intended function to be the vehicle of our pain.

Happiness, he considers a deadly habit,\textsuperscript{54} and those unfortunate enough to be happy lack

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p.292.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., p.154.
\textsuperscript{52} Freud, \textit{Beyond the Pleasure Principle}, p.311.
\textsuperscript{53} Unamuno, \textit{The Tragic Sense of Life}, p.154.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., p.225.
inner meaning. These people are prey to inertia or sloth, a failure of longing. The spirit or soul reaches both inwards and outwards towards God. Only what is not conscious desires rest. Unamuno sees learning and discovery as offering the maintenance of personal consciousness in activity. He denigrates the idea of a mystical absorption into God as an annihilation of the self or a ‘prolonged tedium’.

Once the move towards self-consciousness begins, it continues to move on an ascending path towards God. Sorrow and pain allow the soul to continue moving forward: yet the longing for God wishes never to be actually fulfilled, for if it were, there could be no further expansion of consciousness or upward movement. This perspective, which sees the subject as continually struggling and attempting to move beyond himself can be set against a holistic notion of balance and harmony. To build the soul, then, means to embrace suffering for its salutary effects, to restlessly strive to learn and discover, and to be aware of the tragic sense of life, which is, for Unamuno, deeper than reason.

‘...The Christ worshipped on the cross is the agonising Christ...And it is this Christ...that agonic believers worship.’ Christ came to bring us agony, says Unamuno: struggle, not peace. Like Simone Weil, Unamuno’s thought proposes Christ’s life as exemplary: the model of a life is to imitate Christ in taking up one’s own cross. Christ is conscious of the sins of the world, he has the most developed conscience of any being. Christ’s suffering is of ‘blood anguish and heart torment’ and he ‘lives with a sadness of soul until death’. Only that which suffers is divine, says Unamuno. This is close to the

55 Ibid., p.231.
56 Ibid., p.249.
57 Ibid., pp.278-9.
Weil who aspires to become God, but God crucified. It is a reiteration of a common theme, whose antecedents are to be found, for example, in *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis.⁶⁰

Closer to Unamuno’s home, St Teresa of Avila reiterates, rather more passionately than Thomas à Kempis, the theme of an identification with the crucified Christ: ‘Who can see the Lord covered with wounds and afflicted with persecutions without embracing them, loving them and desiring them for himself?’⁶¹ St Teresa’s outpouring highlights the masochistic element integral to the agonic worshipping of the dying Christ: love, desire, the embrace, are fused with wounds, affliction, persecution. We are far from the abstract Christ of radical theology, whose main task, in the Incarnation, was to institute a dialectical Christianity. This is a Christ of flesh and blood, a desirable body. The Spanish cult of Our Lady of the Sorrows, La Dolorosa, is, in similar vein, Unamuno argues, the cult of the mother in agony.⁶²

The identification with and sexual desire for a dying body, the close working of commonly opposed elements, love and death, gives Christianity its masochistic central paradox and its persuasiveness. This complexity, this fusion of opposites is deep-rooted. Christ crucified may be, for example, a fitting image of the lover who, for Unamuno, is always tragic. Love, for him, is the most tragic thing, a foretaste of death, a delight in the spilling of one’s vital essence. He sees something tragically destructive in the essence of

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⁶⁰ Thomas à Kempis writes, for instance, in a chapter entitled ‘On the Uses of Adversity’, that: ‘It is good for us to encounter troubles and adversities from time to time, for trouble often compels a man to search his heart...’ And in a chapter entitled ‘How we must Follow Christ’s Way of the Cross in Self-Denial’, he has Christ’s disciple say: ‘I have accepted the Cross from Your own hands: as You have laid it upon me, I have accepted it, and will bear it until death.’ Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*.


⁶² Unamuno, *The Agony of Christianity*, p.11
love, an entangling 'in the grip of fury'. This view of love entails a sense of the sexual as involving the deadly as much as the life-giving - a deadliness in the sexual embrace which is spelt out, symbolised in sadomasochism.

But to say this is not to go far enough: Christ's passion narrativises its extreme constituents, allowing death full play, but then reversing the polarities in a redemptive move. The death of Christ, then, is at once the supreme revelation of death and its denial. It is evidently the latter which requires the Christian leap of faith. Unamuno cites Tertullian: 'Et sepultus resurrexit, certum est, quia impossible est!' ('And he was buried and rose again; it is certain, because it is impossible!') in support of his own insistent view that resurrection must be of the body, not just the soul. He relates an anecdote, to illustrate the doctrine of the presence of Christ's body in the blessed host, of a Mass given by St John of the Cross and attended by St Teresa of Avila. When holy communion was to be given, St John broke the Host in two, to divide it between St Teresa and another nun. She apparently believed that this was meant to mortify her. Unamuno quotes her as saying: 'I had told him how much I delighted in Hosts of a large size, though I knew that even in the smallest piece, the Lord is present in his entirety.'

What makes death tolerable, then, what allows the believing Christian to savour an identification with the dying Christ, is the foreknowledge that Christ will rise from the
dead, that Easter will follow Good Friday. ‘From the depths of wretchedness springs new life, and it is only by draining the dregs of spiritual sorrow that the honey at the bottom of life’s cup is tasted. Anguish leads to consolation.’ Elsewhere he states that resurrection implies that death was not total. Suffering, then, while it builds the soul in its interiority, is not quite enough on its own: it also opens up into a dynamic of reversal where a certain kind of gain follows loss, where loss opens up, as it were, a wound capable of receiving deeply the subsequent consolation. Suffering instigates the possibility of a masochistic jouissance: pain or sorrow are not undiluted and pure, but adulterated by the foreshadow of a subsequent move into ecstasy. Knowledge, then, rather than innocence, is necessary for this Christian dynamics in which a future state of grace is gambled on. In sadomasochism it is carnal knowledge. The masochist assents to the onslaught of pain to the extent that he or she acknowledges, realises, knows her fealty to death, her own deadliness, and narrativises it, plays it out.

If the figure of Christ crucified is God incarnate, there is another kind of God invoked in Unamuno’s work, a God who is quite unequivocally a father figure. God remains masculine, God the father, awesome and capable of judging and condemning. God is complex and concrete, suffering and desiring in us, and Unamuno is unapologetically anthropomorphic: God is living, subjective. He is will and personality universalised. The attainment of an intimate experience of the living God is embodied in mysticism, and it is intransmissible, he says. The allure of mysticism becomes somewhat more obvious:

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67 Ibid., p.64.
68 Ibid., p.141
69 Ibid., p.187.
70 Ibid., p.184.
when God is considered as a living, sentient, masculine force: and St Teresa’s
disappointment at the small rations of Host dealt her by her male counterpart.

I am reminded here of Jessica Benjamin’s description, referred to in the opening
chapter, of the masochist who seeks out the powerful ideal other upon whom to be
dependent. Such a desire is obviously infantile, but it may also be that the infant’s sense of
awe, the fused terror of and intense attachment to the father is the very stuff of divinity.
The sense of divinity, from this perspective, actually creates it.

But is masochistic sexuality a variant of a mystical union with God? Is it a staged incest
with a powerful ideal father figure? Is it a transgression of the religious respect for the
abstract God, or an erotic Incarnation? The complexity of masochism allows no simple
way through the labyrinth of questions. Its capacity to absorb oppositions means that it
may be at once homage and transgression, mystical and perverse.

God suffers, Unamuno thinks, and ‘because he suffers he requires our love, and because
we suffer He gives us His love, and He envelops our anguish with the eternal and infinite
anguish’. There is an exchange of love and suffering between man and God. Unamuno’s
God is also potentially cruel. Hell, after all, represents an eternity of suffering for the
damned, and he suggests that perhaps God is capable of enjoying the suffering and
torments of His plaything, man. The image of a cruelly playful God is unusual, within a
Christian context: neither the God of love of the New Testament or the warrior God of the
Old, this God is as terrifying as the latter, as worthy of adoration as the former, and more
complex than either. One thing Unamuno is doing here is facing up to the implications of

71 Ibid., p.222.
72 Ibid., p.268
a God who has created an unfair world full of pathos, and who participates in it. Is God, the immortal, strangely fascinated by His mortal creation? Unamuno is capable of asking: ‘Why should there not be a God who battens on our sufferings? Is our happiness, perchance, the end-purpose of the Universe? Or do we not perhaps sustain some alien wellbeing with our suffering?’  

This God also intervenes into each individual by giving him a secret. ‘God plants a secret in the soul of each man, the deeper the more He loves the man.’ Everyone, he says, carries this secret, and from it comes both our life and our death. This mystery is unseen, he thinks, by anyone, in general never glimpsed by the person in whom it is implanted. It is at the root of our thoughts and feelings, like a vivifying liquid which arises from a dark, interior space: ‘The roots of our feelings and thoughts do not need light, but water, water under ground, dark, silent water; a water which seeps in and soaks and does not run off, the water of solitude.’ A secret, for Unamuno is, not surprisingly, a ‘father force’ eternal and fertile, producing scientific discovery and intellectual achievement. This occult inner world must exist, says Unamuno, otherwise ‘how do you explain such mysterious voices of silence as come to us from deeper than the soul, from deeper than its roots?’  

This last assertion seems to be intended less as an intellectual sally than an affective one, to be felt rather than thought. He explicitly argues that the faculty of reason is opposed to another faculty through which we can apprehend mystery and divinity: ‘In order to

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73 Ibid.  
74 Unamuno, Essays on Faith, p.188  
75 Ibid. p.190.  
76 Ibid.  
77 Ibid.
understand anything it must first be killed, laid out rigid in the mind’. Analysis, he thinks, tends towards death, and on the other hand life is ‘absolutely unstable, absolutely individual’. Life and reason are locked in a tragic combat. But if reason tends towards death, it is a necessary tendency: impurity and ill health, he thinks, stimulate the brain and ignite reason: a reason which has its origins in the desire to know, which originated in Eve’s wish to taste the fruit of the tree of good and evil, at least in the Christian myth. Man is, says Unamuno, a sick animal, essentially diseased through his recognition of his mortality. It is a recognition which for him is extremely difficult to accept. The longing for immortality imbues his work, a claustrophobia within the limits of existence is passionately proclaimed: ‘The visible Universe, the one created by the instinct of self-preservation, strikes me as too narrow. It is like an over-small cage against whose bars my soul beats its wings. I need more air to breathe: more, more, always more!’ If reason is a sickness, we cannot hope for a cure, perhaps, and yet we chafe against the limitations that we recognise, asserting whatever vitality we can lay claim to, to go beyond them. For Unamuno there is an affective space which in a passive sense places faith or trust in God: actively, it is identifiable as the act of will, of heroic achievement and the creative power. We know in our reason that God does not exist, that we will die: we long for God to exist, bringing Him thereby into existence through action. Does the dialectic stop there? The implication seems to be that the human is now the crucible of the sacred in which God may be made to exist - a task only to be even contemplated by

78 Ibid., p.100.  
79 Ibid.  
80 Ibid., p.43.  
81 Ibid., p.203.
exceptional individuals. Mircea Eliade remarks in *The Myth of the Eternal Return* that 'the majority of Christians, and especially the popular elements, refuse to live the genuine life of Christianity', 82 because of the extreme religious tension involved - pagan rites offering more solace. How much more difficult is Unamuno's call to invent God, and keep on reinventing Him each time reason catches up with life and puts Him to death again. Only an Unamuno or a Simone Weil could hope to make the grade, becoming, through their agonising and their extraordinary creativity, like a demiurge, half-way between man and God. The combat between the life impulses and those which move towards death may emerge at the sexual level in the staging of humiliation, struggle, agony, death and redemption which is masochism. It also acts as a motor for literary creativity which, with all the force of an act of assertion and will, simultaneously holds within itself a space haunted by silent voices: voices heard only within these depths, not in the quick pulse of life.

The battle between Eros and Thanatos impels a literature which contains, rather than dissipates, a high level of tension. For Unamuno, literature's power lies in its capacity to convey something beyond thought, beyond the comprehensible. 'And this Word, which was made flesh, died after the passion, after the agony, and the Word became the Letter,' he writes. 83 The Letter, or the Book or Christian dogma (especially Protestant dogma) kills through negation. It kills by ending the life of struggle or agony, and it is dead in itself. If the Word - Christ incarnate - is to continue to live, it must be in the flesh, the agonised and suffering flesh, the body which is sorrowful unto death. One might speculate

here about the potential power which might lie in some, though not all literature. If literature inhabits the uncertain space that Unamuno maps out for the word, under what impulse would a reader seek it out? Could it be, for example, that literature, whether or not consciously inspired by high moral values, offers up an interiority in which a dynamic struggle takes place, to the receptive capacity of a reader unprepared to live at that level of uncertainty permanently?

Scrupulously preaching only what he practised, Unamuno made his own word incarnate in a number of novels which are landmarks in Spanish modern literature. And to the extent that the institutionalised God of Christianity has been thrown into the relentless forward movement of history, it has been literature in this century which, I would argue, has taken up the task of soul-building. Literature, including that which rejects the pomp of traditional religious practice, has relocated the sacred in the places that conventional believers would consider as profane, in a return to the carnal initiated by the Incarnation, a return to the body as ecstatic, suffering, and erotic.
CHAPTER THREE

I. The Birth of Masochism

Although masochistic motifs are traceable in literature at least as far back as courtly love poetry, indicating a corollary presence in the psychic make-up, the naming of masochism as a clinical term in the late part of the nineteenth century is a significant moment which encapsulates the territorial strife between literature and psychiatric/psychoanalytic discourses over its character. The opening part of this chapter traces the trajectories of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and Baron Dr Richard von Krafft-Ebing through the historical circumstances that led to the creation of masochism as we now recognise it. My intention here is to set the record straight by attempting a retrospective untangling of the threads which went into the making of the term, in the hope that a clearer picture may emerge.

In Lemberg, a city in what is now Poland, then Galicia, in 1836, the wife of the chief of police gave birth to a son. These were tumultuous times, with strife between Poles and Austrians endemic. Despite his wealthy, aristocratic family background, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s childhood was not to be a sheltered one. According to one of his biographers when Leopold was ten years old, a revolt of the Polish nobility backfired when the Polish peasants seized the chance to massacre their masters. The child was to hear and read of the atrocities committed in subsequent years. At the age of twelve, he was out on the barricades during an attempted revolution in Prague which his father was in the process of crushing. Leopold proved brilliant at school and in 1852 began to study

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1 All biographical information on Sacher-Masoch, except where otherwise indicated, is taken from Michel, Sacher-Masoch.
law at the University of Prague. By the age of 20 he was already lecturing in German
history at the University of Graz, having been awarded a doctorate.¹

In 1861, at the age of 25, he began an affair with Anna von Kottowitz, wife of a doctor
of medicine, and ten years older than Leopold. This was to last four years. It was not
until 1869, when Leopold was in his early thirties, that the character of his emotional and
sexual preferences emerged clearly. While editor of The Austrian Arbour, a literary
journal, he began an affair with Fanny Pistor, author of short stories, drawing up a
pseudo-legal contract with her to become her slave for six months in exchange for the
wearing of furs. The two writers travelled to Italy together, with Leopold taking the name
of Gregor and acting as Fanny's servant. The affair seems to have expired at the same
time as the contract, but it inspired Sacher-Masoch's most famous novel, Venus im Pelz
(Venus in Furs), published in 1870.⁴

Sacher-Masoch had become a celebrated writer whose works enjoyed enormous
acclaim, from critics and from the reading public, during his lifetime. His relationship with
his wife Wanda, whom he married in 1873, was to follow a similar pattern to the one
established with Fanny Pistor. He lived his work and wrote of his life, at least in part.
The boundaries did not just overflow into each other: they positively energised and fuelled
one another in a mutual dynamic which was playful, serious, extraordinarily productive,
and possibly rather exhausting. Thus Fanny Pistor, a budding author, contacts a Sacher-
Masoch she knows from having read and admired his work: their affair follows fictional
lines drawn up between them, to the extent of their taking on the names of quasi-fictional

¹ His first book was a contribution to historical studies, entitled The Rebellion in Ghent under Charles V.
The lack of academic acclaim with which this book was met was to decide his move into fiction writing.
⁴ I refer to the translation by J. McNeil in Deleuze, Masochism.
characters, acting out a fictional relationship between mistress and servant, and giving it the exciting foreign backdrop of Italy. The third, male character is sought after as an essential element, the rival, since betrayal is to be crucial to this risqué narrative.

Sacher-Masoch's life is lived as literature because he plans it like that. His literature takes life from it: Venus in Furs is the fictionalised account of Fanny and Leopold's real-life affair. It is worth remembering that his wife Wanda was also a writer of stories - indeed, she used her literary talents after her ex-husband's death to ruthlessly exploit his name and reputation. All this to make what ought to be an obvious point: Sacher-Masoch, at every level, is about fiction, about literature: the lived life is a sophisticated, daring manipulation of reality. Masochistic experience is a lived fiction, not the material of a pathology: any reading of it as such misses its fictive core, is a misreading or literalisation.

Doctor Richard von Krafft-Ebing was to make this misreading in his creation of the term masochism, taking Sacher-Masoch's life as the evidence of a perversion which one could describe in clinical terms and treat through clinical methods. Not that Krafft-Ebing is unaware of the artistic elements inherent in Sacher-Masoch's work; but his characterisation of masochism makes such elements the trappings of a sexual aberration, without recognising the centrality of the literary imagination at work. In 1872, Krafft-Ebing took up the newly created chair in psychiatry and neurology at the University of Graz, where Sacher-Masoch had until recently lectured in history. He taught there until 1889, without having any personal links with the writer. Bernard Michel, Sacher-Masoch's French biographer, suggests that it is likely that Krafft-Ebing heard 'des
rumeurs diverses qui couraient sur lui dans la bonne société locale\textsuperscript{5}: Sacher-Masoch still lived in Graz.

Michel corrects the false idea that Krafft-Ebing first launched the neologism of masochism in his \textit{Psychopathia Sexualis} of 1886: it was not, in fact, in that publication but another, \textit{Neue Forschungen auf dem Gebiet der Psychopathia Sexualis (New Researches into the Domain of Sexual Psychopathology)}, published the year after Krafft-Ebing left Graz for Vienna, that he first patented the term. However, later editions and translations of \textit{Psychopathia Sexualis} incorporate the work on masochism, which would account for the widespread mistake.\textsuperscript{6} One might speculate that Krafft-Ebing waited for the safety of Vienna before publishing his work on masochism, which he suspected would be interpreted as an offence against a kind of local celebrity.

By describing the work of the novelist as the result of a sexual perversion, Michel points out Krafft-Ebing ‘d’un seul coup... rendait Sacher-Masoch immortel, banalisé à travers toutes les langues du monde, mais il le tuait en tant qu’écrivain.’\textsuperscript{7} The violence of the psychiatrist’s move was not lost on Sacher-Masoch, who indignantly refused the appropriation of his subject-matter, the transformation of art into illness, pleasure into pathology. He decided not to go into print. There was to be no public refutation of Krafft-Ebing’s claims.

Doubtless the acquisition of Sacher-Masoch, offering the useful complementarity with Sade, was strategically of considerable importance to early sexology. Updated versions of

\textsuperscript{5} Michel, \textit{Sacher-Masoch}, p.294.

\textsuperscript{6} The earliest translation into English, by Chaddock, published in 1892, already includes reference to masochism.

\textsuperscript{7} Michel \textit{Sacher-Masoch}, p.7.
Psychopathia Sexualis were to go into many a reprint. This was a different kind of literature, however, from Sacher-Masoch’s novels: it was about what other people did, behind closed doors, people who were ill and their strange behaviour. This sexological discourse, as I have remarked in the introduction, offers a positioning of the reader as the sane, normal viewer of what is hardly more than a freak show, with human exhibits appropriately labelled according to their aberration and put through their paces, all equally pitiful and pathetic.

Krafft-Ebing had, in effect, vulgarised Sacher-Masoch, in spite of the veneer of respectability that clings to the medical doctor (Sacher-Masoch was, after all, a doctor, too). The effects of this vulgarisation were pernicious, not just for the writer and his oeuvre, although two contemporary French thinkers, Gilles Deleuze and Pascal Quignard, have recently gone some way to rescuing that work from the oblivion into which it has fallen. It is pernicious for all the disparate strands of experience, thought, desire, imagination, brought together under the term masochism, and now to be understood as tendencies requiring treatment rather than as central aspects of what it is to be human.

But masochism is now far too useful a term to be rejected outright. Better to salvage from its difficult origins an enriched proposition of a masochism operating at the imaginative level, the ethical and the sexual levels. If masochism can be rethought in this way, vistas of personal and artistic possibilities open up. Masochism comes out of the penal colony, and its traits and operations can be identified. Krafft-Ebing’s

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8 Deleuze, Présentation de Sacher-Masoch.
9 Quignard, L’être du balbutiement.
characterisation of masochism creates, I want to argue, a blockage in consciousness, is perhaps commonly found so useful precisely because it stops up a certain kind of recognition, ultimately the recognition of one’s mortality. Freud’s approach is of a different order, in positing a universal, primary masochism: this important insight, however, has not prevented the notion of pathology from persisting within and beyond psychoanalysis.

Krafft-Ebing’s view of masochism was gender-specific: it was men who wanted to submit to the will and power of a woman. The range of possibilities open to such men included allowing themselves to be flagellated, but even enjoyment of a domineering attitude by a woman was sufficient to bring them into the category of the masochists. As Bernard Michel remarks, the doctor spread his net rather wide: ‘Il faisait entrer dans le nouveau concept du masochisme des éléments extrêmement différents; depuis l’homme qui recherche une femme brillante et dominatrice jusqu’à celui qui trouve son plaisir à se faire fouetter et piétiner par des prostituées de bas étage.’

The masculine fascination for a woman exceptional for her beauty and brilliance, as well as her taste for domination, was placed by the psychiatrist on the same level as the easily gratified wish for a whipping in a brothel. Krafft-Ebing’s proposal of a mutual link between sadism and masochism was to be an enduring one, which, however, has recently been challenged by Deleuze, as I shall elucidate in the next section of this chapter.

Already, then, the foundation of the clinical concept of masochism can be seen to be less than rock-solid. The psychiatrist’s rationale for its creation does not bear scrutiny either. In novelistic literature, he claims, the theme of the masculine desire for submission

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10 Michel, Sacher-Masoch, p.294.
to a woman has been treated almost exclusively by Sacher-Masoch. This assertion is erroneous. Sacher-Masoch was not the originator of the theme of the cruel woman: it was a commonplace of romantic literature and in particular of the Romantic-Decadent literature of the time. Mario Praz shows that infatuation for the domineering, cruel woman who exerts a deadly fascination upon the male poet was a central theme in writings by numerous authors of the time, from Swinburne to Baudelaire, Huysmans to D'Annunzio. In general the theme appears to be most popular in the French tradition, which may account for the lionising of Sacher-Masoch in Paris. The French popularity of the dominatrix in literature may also account for the recent rescue work of Deleuze and Quignard. Sacher-Masoch, successfully banalised by Vienna, has become readable from the French literary context in which he was, during his lifetime, perhaps best understood.

When faced with the ubiquity of what would now be called masochistic themes in literature, one might hope that the seeds of doubt could take root in those who purvey such themes as perversions. But in a simple move, these writers are simply retrospectively described as masochistic, so that a translator of Krafft-Ebing could make the claim that a poet who describes the dependency of passion is 'taking exactly the same path as the masochist': he considers courtly love as bearing a 'clearly masochistic character' and

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11 Praz, The Romantic Agony. This excerpt from Swinburne, quoted by Praz, is comparable with anything written by Sacher-Masoch: 'Her perfume thrilled and stung him; he bent down and kissed her feet... which he took and pressed down upon his neck. “Oh! I should like you to tread me to death, darling... I wish you would kill me some day; it would be just so jolly to feel you killing me. Not like it? Shouldn’t it! You just hurt me and see.” She pinched him so sharply that he laughed and panted with pleasure.' pp. 236-7.

12 ‘Pour lui,’ writes Michel, 'ce voyage triomphal à Paris représentait un rêve ancien: connaître un pays qu'il considérerait comme sa seconde patrie, dont il parlait la langue depuis l'enfance.' (p. 274.) Michel tells us that Sacher-Masoch was regularly published in translation by Hachette and Calmann-Levy and his work had made him a celebrity even before his visit, in December 1886.


14 Ibid.
finds it interesting that the poetry of the ancients used the term *domina* to describe the female beloved. This is to put the cart before the horse: of course such analogies can be made, precisely because it was from that heritage that Sacher-Masoch took his cue. Such a long genealogy and such impeccable forebears seem to situate masochism in quite a different place from the numbered case histories of Krafft-Ebing, whose subjects have no better appellation than an initial, where they are given any at all, and which record gross details of onanism, ejaculation and so on. Sacher-Masoch’s work can be seen as part of late Romantic literature, as an example of a writing which enjoyed a widespread popularity, and which draws on deep-rooted literary traditions. In France, Baudelaire, for example, also wrote of his real-life mistresses and projected an artist’s imagination into the lived experience of his affairs. But as we will see, Krafft-Ebing was nothing if not even-handed in his denigration of the figure of the creative writer.

For him, Sacher-Masoch is a man who is afflicted by a sexual anomaly, both in his life and in his work: ‘As an author he suffered severe injury as far as his work is concerned, for so long and whenever he eliminated his perversion from his literary efforts, he was a gifted writer, and as such would have achieved real greatness had he been actuated by normally sexual feelings.’¹⁵ A psychiatrist here puts himself in the position of judging the relative merit of a poet’s oeuvre, without having any qualification to do so. Could the novelist have been greater were he to have repressed his sexual tendencies? His most celebrated work is *Venus in Furs*, which explicitly treats of his sexual slavery to a woman. The argument is actually wishful thinking. Would Sade’s work have been rather more interesting were he less infatuated with cruelty, or Genet’s been greater with the

criminality and homosexuality cut out? The sexual obsessions and particularities of
writers, literary history seems to show, have been a positive storehouse of energy for the
writer, inexhaustibly fuelling the production and shaping the nature of the emergent
literary work.

The difficulties and obsessions of the writer are analogous to the grit in the oyster that
ultimately results in the pearl. And if Sacher-Masoch wrote dirty books, Krafft-Ebing’s
were rather dirtier. His subject-matter covers mutilation of corpses, beast fetishism,
defilement of statues, satyriasis and many other exotic sexual tendencies. Nor was this
subject-matter received with scientific disinterestedness by the reading public of the time.
A colleague of the psychiatrist wrote in 1892 that the appearance so far of seven editions
of the work could hardly mean that its circulation was confined to a scientific readership:
‘Therefore, it cannot be denied that a pornographic interest on the part of the public is
accountable for a part of the wide circulation of the book.’ 16 An introduction to a more
recent translation argues that: ‘While Psychopathia Sexualis contains macabre sections
and descriptions of tortured people, it is a medical work designed to enlighten, not to
stimulate sensationalism.’ 17 In terms of content, then, Krafft-Ebing is far more
pornographic than Sacher-Masoch. The British Medical Journal of 1893 questioned
whether his work should have been translated into English at all. 18 As to the psychiatrist’s
sententious claim that he had chosen a title ‘understood only by the learned’ and that it
seemed necessary also ‘to give certain particularly revolting portions in Latin rather than

16 A. von Shrenk-Notzing, Die Suggestions-Therapie (Stuttgart 1892), cited in the translator’s preface to
Krafft-Ebing, Psychopathia Sexualis (1892).
17 Cited in translator’s preface to Krafft-Ebing, Psychopathia Sexualis, (1965).
18 Cited in ibid.
German', the BMJ responded: 'Better if it had been written entirely in Latin, and thus veiled in the decent obscurity of a dead language.' Krafft-Ebing, with his evident interest in exotic sexual material, was breaking taboos extensively. This very transgression was responsible for the popularity of his books inside and beyond the medical community.

Krafft-Ebing could have called his discovery Rousseauism, in that he describes in some detail the philosopher's expressed longing (in the *Confessions*) to be subjected to an imperious mistress. But calling his perversion masochism must have allowed him to build on the large popular readership of Sacher-Masoch's work. While claiming to wish his work were restricted to a scientific readership, he made reference to a writer whose work might not be expected to reach that readership. The novelist was admired in Graz, where they both lived for some years, and the psychiatrist's creation of the neologism led to accusations of foul play by some of his admirers. Others of them became the patients of Krafft-Ebing, hoping that the normality so often found lacking could be attained by the psychiatry that championed it: a normality to which Sacher-Masoch had never aspired, and which, one imagines, he would have found as tedious as Severin's friend finds the works of Hegel in the opening chapter of *Venus in Furs*.

Extrapolating from Lombroso, this is what Krafft-Ebing has to say about Baudelaire: 'Baudelaire came of an insane and eccentric family. From his youth he was psychically abnormal. His sexual life was decidedly abnormal. He had love-affairs with ugly, repulsive women - negresses, dwarfs, giantesses. About a very beautiful woman he expressed the wish to see her hung up by her hands and kiss her feet. This enthusiasm for the naked foot

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19 Cited in translator's preface to Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1892).
also appears in one of his fiercely feverish poems as the equivalent of sexual indulgence. He said woman were animals who had to be shut up, beaten and fed well. The man displaying these masochistic and sadistic inclinations died of paretic dementia. The caricature of Baudelaire rests upon a rigid policing of the boundaries between normal and abnormal, in which a woman, to be acceptable, must be neither too tall, too small, must be white and conform to dominant notions of attractiveness. It relies also on an elision of the centrality of Baudelaire's poetry.

Why refer to writers at all? Why discuss Rousseau, Baudelaire and Sacher-Masoch as if they were case histories, if not to reduce them to the level of the patients who visited the psychiatrist to ask for help? For that reason alone, these literary figures cannot be considered on the same level as those others who appear as the curiously faceless subjects of Krafft-Ebing's classifications, known by occupation, sexual proclivity and odd physiological details. Rousseau and Baudelaire were not people who sought help, or felt themselves to be ill. Their lives were meaningful, productive, their work remarkable. The vilified writer, then, seems necessary to Krafft-Ebing's project.

Discussing the early psychiatrists' classificatory descriptions of sexual pleasures, Foucault writes: 'C'était le moment où les plaisirs les plus singuliers étaient appelés à tenir

22 For example: 'Case 59. Masochism. Z., aged 27, artist. He is powerfully built, of pleasing appearance, and is said to be free of hereditary taint. Healthy in youth, since his twenty-third year he has been nervous and inclined to be hypochondriacal. Though inclined to indulgence sexually, he is not very virile...Since his twenty-fifth year he has noticed that females, no matter how ugly, always excite him sexually whenever he discovers anything domineering in their character. An angry word from the lips of such a woman is sufficient to give him the most violent erections...Z requires the woman, with whom he is to have sexual intercourse, to repulse and annoy him in various ways. He thinks that only a woman like the heroines of Sacher-Masoch's romances could charm him.' Krafft-Ebing, Psychopathia Sexualis (1965), p.144. It is worth remembering here that the novelist's heroines are always beautiful, and that erections are not part of their subject matter.
sur eux-mêmes un discours de vérité qui avait à s’articuler non plus sur celui qui parle du péché et du salut, de la mort et de l’éternité, mais sur celui qui parle du corps et de la vie - sur le discours de la science.'

This science was a confessional one, which relied on ‘(une) extorsion multiple et insistant.'

Perhaps the construction of a science of the psyche, psychiatry, had necessarily to compete with a thoroughly established art, that is, literature. While Krafft-Ebing could bring under observation areas of human behaviour which had been left for the most part unexplored by literature, for example onanism and ejaculation, could subject these phenomena to systematic study, so that the number of ejaculations could be measured, and so on, this still left enormous continents of thought, action and passion within the province of the poet. The poets of the time had been, as I have already mentioned, exploring the seamier side of love and in particular, longings for cruel treatment at the hands of the beloved, where the poet is a:

Martyr docile, innocent condamné

Dont la ferveur attise le supplice...#5

The task of psychiatry would have to be not just to locate the areas of sexuality which could be empirically studied, but to wrest from the poets, to situate within scientific discourse, some unusual aspects of erotism. Krafft-Ebing’s hostility to the figure of the writer can be seen as fueled by rivalry. The construction of the term masochism is an appropriation of the energy of a sexual poetry, which kills its roots. The sexuality which is

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23 Foucault, Histoire de la sexualité I, p.86.
24 Ibid.
generalisable has lost its individual soul: sexuality made into perversion has been transformed from poetic inspiration to medical concern.

By the time Freud published ‘The Economic Principle of Masochism’ in 1924, there was no longer any need to refer to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. The founder of psychoanalysis follows the psychiatrist in regarding masochism as linked to femininity and the feminine psyche. He differs from Krafft-Ebing in his emphasis on masochism as pleasure in pain (the psychiatrist saw domination and submission as the essence of masochism) and on the question of heredity. Freud replaces this explanation with his own, of a regression to an infantile state. The psychiatrist’s claim that: ‘It is entirely physiological that playful taps and light blows should be taken for caresses’ is transformed into Freud’s proposal of an original, erotogenic masochism underlying all masochism. He struggles to enrich and develop Krafft-Ebing’s view that sadism and masochism are opposite and complementary. And he extends the definition of the sexual perversion to include morality. He goes far beyond the original conception of masochism in linking it with a death instinct, yet seems blocked in trying to develop his ideas further. Sacher-Masoch’s life and work, the foundation stone of these constructions, was buried. The subsequent parts of this chapter return to Sacher-Masoch, reintroducing the uniqueness of the proper name against the erasure of psychiatry and psychoanalysis, going back to the point of departure.

26 ‘...genuine, complete, deep-rooted masochism, with its feverish longing for subjection from the time of earliest youth, is congenital.’ Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathic Sexualis*, (1965), p.137.
27 Ibid., p.134.
II. Venus in Furs

I want to begin the task of putting Sacher-Masoch's name back into the centre stage by looking at the only novel of his available in English, drawing out of it the motifs, images and stylistic concerns that allow an identification of the masochistic imaginary in literature. Gilles Deleuze's commentary on the text has been enormously influential, to the point where it is hard to read the original except through his theoretical spectacles. And Deleuze reads Sacher-Masoch's work in French, so this is all the more a Parisian enterprise. Deleuze's account of the novel sophisticatedly deploys Freud's discussion of Eros and Thanatos at work in the subject to detect in this novel the deadly movement of repetition within temporality. The far-reaching philosophical implications he arrives at may be what makes his commentary so resonant. My intention here is to bring Deleuze's insights to bear on my own inquiry into sexual and textual masochism.

Mink, ermine, fox... Wanda, heroine of Sacher-Masoch's best-known novel, Venus in Furs, trails death behind her in the form of numerous unlamented rodents and one swiftly-mourned husband. The beautiful, wealthy widow will make the perfect torturess for studious, stammering Severin: yet the roles of hunter and prey are strangely difficult to allocate.

Severin is the one who relates the story, an extended anecdote told to a male friend over tea and cigarettes. His own title for the narrative is 'Confessions of a Supersensualist'. Between the two men exists a respectful intimacy, and entry into
Sacher-Masoch’s world is to be on Severin’s terms. The friend, invited into the narrator’s study, exemplifies a kind of perfect (male) reader, who is used to Severin’s ‘eccentricities’, his ‘odd character’ and who has a ‘great liking’ for him. The book begins, then, with a kind of pact between reader and writer, where a certain decency is understood to apply on both sides. By this hearth, Sacher-Masoch seems to suggest, suspend all anxiety. Nothing in this story could possibly be interpreted as offensive. At the outset, then, a complicity is created between reader and narrator. This very cosiness is what allows Sacher-Masoch to go as far as he does in describing his scenes of erotic suffering. Gilles Deleuze, whose Présentation de Sacher-Masoch I shall consistently refer to here, writes of the author: ‘...il faut dire qu’on n’a jamais été aussi loin, avec autant de décence’. There are no obscenities. The nudity of the woman figure is always covered, by her furs. Sacher-Masoch, says Deleuze, presents a large part of his oeuvre ‘sur un mode rose.’ The readerly pact, then, is made with Severin, the victim, rather than Wanda: the collusion between the two men friends hints in advance that even if the feminine may be central in the forthcoming narrative, it will be as a thoroughly masculine projection.

The story of Severin’s affair with Wanda begins with his worshipping her from afar. She initiates the friendship, and amid his blushing and stammering, reveals herself to be an admirer of Greek civilisation and its sensual freedoms. Despite her mischievous, mocking self-assurance, it is not at all clear that Wanda is prepared to carry out her hedonistic

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28 Cf. Segal, The Unintended Reader for a discussion of smut in literature and its framing within the conversation of two men about an absent woman.
29 Sacher-Masoch, Venus in Furs, p.147.
30 Deleuze, Présentation de Sacher-Masoch, p.32.
31 Ibid., p. 24.
programme. Severin, for all his shyness and modesty, clearly states his own position, in
their first conversation: ‘If I were faced with the choice of dominating or being dominated,
I would choose the latter. It would be far more satisfying to be the slave of a beautiful
woman. But I should hate her to be a petty, nagging tyrant - where should I find a woman
to dominate me in a serene and fully conscious manner?’ 32 Despite his timidity, Severin
has caught hold of Wanda’s hand. He covertly flatters her while playing up to her
imperious attitude, drawing her into his own view of sexual relations even while she
proudly proclaims her own paganism.

However much Severin professes his amateurishness and his terror of Wanda, however
much he stutters, demurs, or is paralysed, he will single-mindedly pursue his own pleasure
and will systematically mould her to the dominatrix figure he needs to fulfil his desire.
Much of the novel is taken up by the dialogue between the lovers, and during these
conversations, Severin continually reiterates his desire for cruel treatment at the hands of a
woman, and Wanda in particular. ‘It is because we are opposites - indeed almost enemies
- that my love for you is part hatred, part fear. But in such relations, one person must be
the hammer, the other, the anvil: I cannot be happy if I must look down on the woman I
love. I want to be able to worship a woman, and I can only do so if she is cruel to me.’ 33
In this and many other such speeches, Severin puts forward a vision of love which
gradually intoxicates Wanda. ‘Le masochiste... doit amener la femme au point idéal de la
fonction qui lui est assignée.’ 34 Deleuze sees the masochist as an educator who gradually
overcomes the resistance of the woman to his desires for bondage and slavery. Wanda is

32 Sacher-Masoch, Venus in Furs, p. 163.
33 Ibid., pp.171-2.
34 Deleuze, Présentation de Sacher-Masoch, p.103.
resistant. She herself wants to be dominated: 'I can indeed imagine belonging to one man
for life, but he would have to be a real man who commands my respect and enslaves me by
his innate power... I could only love a man before whom I myself should have to kneel.'

When Severin demands that she be despotic and tyrannical, she replies severely that 'this
will end badly, my friend,' (which is not, in fact, quite true, since both of them are able,
in the end, to live out their fantasies).

What follows is a process of masochistic seduction, whose stages are as follows.

Severin relates to her the stories of his previous love affairs - including the seduction of a
mink-clad aunt who had beaten him as a child - and Wanda begins to be affected. She tells
him that he has aroused her imagination, that he is 'the sort of man who will utterly
corrupt a woman'. Wearing sable, she enters his room in the middle of the night, upon
which Severin treats her to a learned discourse upon the ecstatic cruelties of martyrdom,
finally falling at her feet to propose a contract of slavery. The next day she asks him never
to speak of such matters to her again, warning him twice of the dangers of his proposals.
Soon after, she capitulates, and is drawn further and further into the role of torturess, yet
at each stage begging to be released.

The character of Wanda is rather a thin construction, just strong enough to support the
weight of Severin’s fantasy. First he begins to worship the statue of Venus: then Wanda
appears, Venus incarnate. ‘The goddess asked my name and told me hers: she is called
Wanda von Dunajew and she is none other than my Venus.’ Her red hair, her bold and

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35 Sacher-Masoch, Venus in Furs, p.168.
36 Ibid., p.170.
37 Ibid., p.177.
38 Ibid., p.158.
decisive way of speaking, her severe and domineering expressions, all build up the picture of the dominatrix. Wanda is a fantasy figure, the agent of Severin’s desire, articulating the lines he ventriloquises and framing the gestures he choreographs in order to orchestrate his desire. One thing Wanda cannot be is a sadist. ‘Si la femme-bourreau, dans le masochisme ne peut pas être sadique, c’est précisément parce qu’elle est dans le masochisme, parce qu’elle est partie intégrante de la situation masochiste, élément réalisé du phantasme masochiste: elle appartient au masochisme.’ Wanda is necessary to make Severin suffer, she is the essential element of what Deleuze calls ‘faire-souffrir’ within Sacher-Masoch’s tableau vivant. The masochist, Deleuze points out, has no need of another, sadistic subject. Severin the narrator tells the story of a woman who is described as gradually ceding her own desires in favour of his, not about a man who falls in love with a female character who is already cruel. The persuasion, the education of Wanda is a crucial aspect of the masochistic fantasy. When Wanda has fulfilled the original programme, by allowing Severin to dress as her servant, by bondage and flagellation, what further humiliation could be in store but her betrayal of him in favour of ‘the Greek’ - a desirably androgynous figure who allows Severin to act the part of Marsyus flayed by Apollo?

The formal techniques of Venus in Furs reinforce the identification with Severin, the narrator. Deleuze shows how suspense is essential to its impact. Severin is often actually suspended, when being made ready for punishment. Wanda suspends the narrative by striking poses when about to beat the hero or to slip on a stole. There is also a great deal of nervous anticipation involved, while Severin waits for Wanda to send for him, or when

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39 Deleuze, Présentation de Sacher-Masoch, p.37.
he wonders: 'What are her plans? What does she intend to do with me?' And while bound, he has to listen to her speeches before she begins the flagellation. ‘L’art du suspens nous met toujours du côté de la victime,’ writes Deleuze. This static, suspended quality applies, too, to the milieu in which Venus in Furs is set, in which a cultured, wealthy aristocracy invests in art (Wanda has her portrait painted by a German artist who predictably falls for her charms), reads novels such as Manon Lescaut or attends social functions to punctuate the monotony of a life deprived of dynamism. Severin, more resourceful than most, introduces an element of risk: by submitting to Wanda’s whip, by acting as her servant, he can take a breath of fresh air: ‘Night falls again, and I lie on a wooden bench that feels like a rack, and bruises my limbs cruelly. Yet my situation has a certain poetry about it.’ He is playing at allowing a woman to take the upper hand, even though the narrator has Wanda say that Severin is her superior ‘both physically and intellectually.’ Severin, in his servant’s role, is yoked to a plough and made to pull it by Wanda’s three black women servants, reversing the racial power relations of the time.

Given that the milieu of Venus reflects Sacher-Masoch’s own, the popularity of his novels may have stemmed in part from this combination of risky power reversals and reassuring presentation. The pain, discomfort and restrictions borne by women, servants, racial minorities, could be diluted and aestheticised into an enjoyable literary experience.

But Severin is a risk-taker - in spite of the cushioned environment, in spite of the fact that all the characters keep their virtue. For the narrator, language is action. The contract that

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40 Sacher-Masoch, Venus in Furs, p.203.
41 Deleuze, Présentation de Sacher-Masoch, p.31.
42 Sacher-Masoch, Venus in Furs, p.209.
43 Ibid., p.265.
he signs, becoming Wanda’s slave, joins word and act together in a manner analogous to
the way in which Sacher-Masoch’s life and work produced each other. The close link
between them is a focus for Deleuze, who writes: ‘Il semble que, pour Masoch comme
pour Sade, le langage prenne toute sa valeur en agissant directement sur la sensualité...
Chez Masoch, dans sa vie comme dans son œuvre, il faut que les amours soient
déclenchées par des lettres anonymes ou pseudonymes, et par des petites annonces; il faut
qu’elles soient réglées par des contrats qui les formalisent, qui les verbalisent; et les choses
doivent être dites, promises, annoncées.’  For Deleuze, the masochist needs to make a
pact with a woman, and to take the risk inherent in the role of the persuader. He
considers the risk to be located in the doubt of the woman torturer: she may either fall
short of her part, or she may overplay it.

But there are other elements of risk, too. An obvious one is that of the violence that
Severin endures at the hands of Wanda. The fact that he repeatedly undergoes it bears
witness to a will which is close to invincible. Deleuze approvingly quotes Theodore Reik,
who says that the masochist ‘ne peut être brisé de l’extérieur’  The contract negotiates a
particular space of risk, states the conditions of the gamble.

A further risk which Severin cheerfully faces is that of losing Wanda’s love. The
narrator sets up this unusual conflict between them: again and again, she reminds him that
his submission gives her little pleasure, that she is, in fact, revolted by his demands, that
what she herself wants is a man she can look up to. The issue of feminine betrayal
emerges early on in the novel. “What honest wife has ever been adored as much as a

\[44\] Deleuze, Présentation de Sacher-Masoch, pp.17-18.
\[45\] Ibid., footnote p.78, from Reik, Le Masochisme.
haetera?" asks Wanda. "Yes, it is quite true that a woman's infidelity affords a painful but exquisite pleasure," responds Severin.\textsuperscript{46} The contract appears to be dissipated elsewhere in the novel in these kinds of verbal complicities, in this case with the lovers seemingly agreeing, early on in their relationship, that Wanda must give herself to another man. Yet however playful these scenarios are, however deliberately comical Severin makes himself,\textsuperscript{47} it is as if the novel's dénouement is also the point where masochism ends. The fantasy protects itself from internal collapse, from external threat, by means of the contract: but it cannot protect itself from its own necessity to overreach. Severin, flogged mercilessly by the bloodthirsty Greek, Wanda's new love, is capable of feeling 'a wild and supersensual pleasure' in his treatment... but a moment later he feels that all poetry has been whipped from him, and has a sensation of awakening, a feeling of clarity. The last description of Severin under the whip has a sense of real suffering and frailty: 'My blood was flowing under the whip; I curled up like a worm being crushed.'\textsuperscript{48}

This, then, is the cure that Severin, at the novel's outset, tells his friend he has undergone. But it is not that masochism is over at the point where recognition of real suffering begins. This is the point to which all Severin's clowning, all his mock-passionate speeches, have been leading: real confrontation, in which the intellect can no longer master the body. Severin's resources are spent, he is played out. At the same time, he has reached a kind of ideal: the harm he is now forced to endure is the guarantee that he really

\textsuperscript{46} Sacher-Masoch, \textit{Venus in Furs}, p.193.
\textsuperscript{47} 'With my clenched fists raised to the sky, I resolutely left the room. She flung down the whip and burst into a loud peal of laughter. I imagine my theatrical attitude must have seemed the height of comedy.' \textit{Ibid.}, p.255.
\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 269.
meant it all along, that the stakes were as high as he always, so comically, proclaimed. By a process of deferral of sexual impulses, of sublimation, he has attained to this ideal.

As I have argued in chapter one, idealisation, or secondary masochism, as described by Leo Bersani, may be a necessary detour within sublimation, or primary masochism. Where the ego can fulfil the demands of the ideal, it can also satisfy its narcissism. This journey through idealisation, or ascent through the various levels of purgatory, creates a kind of verticality which is necessary to the achievement of the artist, even if it is undertaken under the impulse of sublimation. This process is at work in *Venus in Furs.* Deleuze writes: ‘Du corps à l’oeuvre d’art, de l’oeuvre d’art aux Idées, il y a toute une ascension qui doit se faire à coups de fouet.’

Earlier, Severin had described how, while still a child, he read a copy of *Lives of the Martyrs:* ‘I read with a horror mingled with intense pleasure how they suffered the worst torments with a smile, how they languished in prison cells, were tortured on the rack, pierced by arrows, cast into boiling pitch, thrown to wild animals or nailed on the cross...’ By the time Severin and Wanda part company, he has become the idealised, martyred object rather than creative, aestheticising subject. After the dénouement, the novel continues only for a couple more pages, showing the ‘cured’ Severin as the hammer of women, no longer the anvil.

But what exactly has taken place? Certainly not the ‘cruel disaster’ that Severin names his final beating. Deleuze thinks that the masochist attacks the law by reversing the order of pleasure and punishment, and this holds good for all but this last act of punishment. If

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50 Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, p.179.
this expiation precedes no pleasure, how are we to read it? What does it, in fact, precede?
The passage that follows the beating scene is worth quoting here:

...my father was old and sick and wanted me to stay near him. So I simply returned home and for two years shared his worries... Then my father died and quite naturally, and without altering my way of life I became the master of the house. I donned my father's boots of Spanish leather and continued to lead a well-ordered life, as though he were still standing behind me, watching over my shoulder with his great wise eyes. 51

It seems that Severin has acceded to manhood. From a position of worshipping the feminine, in the form of Venus, the goddess of love, in front of the statue of whom he blasphemously recited the Lord's Prayer as a child, he has moved into the patriarchal position.

Is this ending merely the fig-leaf of respectability the author employed to achieve that sought-after effect of decency? Is it mere wrapping-up, satisfying narrative closure, the lid going down on Pandora's box? The built-in risk and the secret intention of masochism is to move out from the imaginary space - of fantasy, play, irony, humour, defiance, poetry - to what is beyond that space. Risky, amorous pleasures then make way for a deadly encounter between Severin, slave of Venus, goddess of love, and the nameless Greek, unsmiling representative of Thanatos. This is also a turn from the initial reversal of patriarchal relations, where masculine infatuation for the erotic power of a woman is foregrounded, to an eroticising of the Greek. Finally the libidinal element disappears altogether.

51 Ibid., pp.269-70.
What is beyond the pleasure principle? asks Deleuze, in reading Freud's eponymous essay. He answers his own question as follows: 'Au-delà d'Eros, Thanatos. Au-delà du fond, le sans-fond. Au-delà de la répétition-lien, la répétition-gomme, qui efface et qui tue.'52 Beyond love, beyond the erotic, and stronger than it, as we have seen Freud assert in his later essay, 'The Economic Problem of Masochism' is the drive to death. Yet Eros and Thanatos cannot be given in their pure form, but always in an admixture of the two. Severin's wish for punishment at the hands of Wanda is, then, a desire for an intoxicating cocktail of deadly eroticism. Yet his adventures remain under the sign of Venus. The introduction of the male figure, the ferocious Greek, shows the masochistic imagination at work, attempting to inject more Eros into Thanatos. But the Greek is deadlier than the female: when Wanda passes him the whip, the atmosphere changes. 'Thanatos, le sans-fond porté par Eros, ramené à la surface, est essentiellement silencieux: d'autant plus terrible,' writes Deleuze.53 Death is brought to the surface by the erotic: the death instinct, Thanatos, is silent and all the more terrible.

I want to argue that Severin, the masochist, has an extreme conscientiousness (here I depart from Deleuze, who sees the sadist as all superego, the masochist all ego); Severin is the human subject who wishes to sacrifice nothing, who wittily manoeuvres and manipulates conventions and other subjects for his own ends, yet all in order to bring to light the limitations of even the most agile and dauntless subjectivity. When the Greek has whipped all the poetry from Severin, his allegiance to Eros is over. In this sense, Severin fails to fulfil an ethical masochism, as I have outlined with reference to Bersani - instead of

52 Deleuze, Présentation de Sacher-Masoch, p.100.
53 Ibid., p.100.
his ascent to the ideal remaining within the feminine, as a necessary detour within
sublimation, he switches sides altogether. However, he has the cruel and deep awakening
that he needs - and refinds himself, genuinely pitiable this time, and with a new clarity
dawning upon him, a new consciousness.

Deleuze points to the importance of becoming a man in Sacher-Masoch's novels, and
the way in which tortures and cruel rites are imposed upon the male hero-victim to bring
him to a second birth. The figure of the crucified Christ is an essential reference point, for
a death-defying initiation rite or, as Severin calls it, a cure. By training himself to endure
pain and humiliation at the hands of a woman, Severin becomes ready to take real pain
from a man, thus conscientiously becoming a true victim. We can see from this that the
essence of masochism is its transitoriness, its movement from one mode or realm to
another. The axis is from the erotic to the deadly, and it is also, in this case, from the
feminine to the masculine. The masochist's self-discipline takes him through a number of
stages, to finally arrive at the stature of a crucified Christ. Arriving at this point, in which
the sublime and the ideal are fused, Severin then moves from the former to the latter, in a
further goal of stepping into his father's shoes.

Deleuze quotes Klossowski as seeing in the scenes of masochism 'La vie se réitérant
pour se ressaisir dans sa chute, comme retenant son souffle dans une appréhension
instantanée de son origine.' This draws attention to the temporal complexity of
masochism, which hold within it the quality of repetition - a transcendental synthesis of
past, present and future. Though in a sense, there is no present time in masochism - it is
an extremely formal and theatrical possibility, a dramatisation, even if paradoxically its

54 Klossowski, La revocation de l'Edit de Nantes, p.15, quoted in Deleuze, Présentation, p.119.
culmination is a scene of intense suffering, pure feeling. A vision of death is acted out, death imagined as the future and as the limit to individuality, but for the full meaning of this limit, masochism must also refer back to origins, to the time before an individuality, a subject, was created. Before birth, the inorganic, the moment before any impulse, before pleasure, before the mother. The achievement of the masochist is to attempt to grasp, with the imagination, to act out, with the body and will, the transition between life and death, looking back to his birth as the only possible point of reference. This may go some way to explaining the crucial element of the woman torturer in *Venus in Furs* - through the mother’s crucible, the chasm between life and death was first bridged: the way back, then, must also be through a woman, for Severin.

There is a more human element of the transition which requires this bloody reliving of the birth trauma, this prefiguring of death agonies. Severin’s journey is also from childhood, to which he often refers in his dialogues with Wanda - childhood, in which the mother is central, and during which emotion and pleasure are indulged - to adulthood, in which responsibilities must be shouldered, feelings subjugated, erotic excesses curtailed. And Severin must now take his father as his ideal, his God. *Venus in Furs* may be read, then, as a text which reveals the extreme difficulty with which an intelligent, sensitive man takes upon himself the order of manhood. Entry into patriarchy, as I hope to show in the following chapter on Michel Leiris, costs more than the price of a mink coat.
III. The Fisher of Souls

In the last part of this chapter I want to look at another novel by Sacher-Masoch, one which has never before been commented on in English. The principal reason for this is to extend the vocabulary beyond the single text to which we invariably refer to ask whether in his other works Sacher-Masoch developed the same concerns, deployed the same stylistic strategies, whether new angles are to be located that can offer us further clues in developing a sense of what constitutes literary masochism.

There is nothing prêt-a-porter about Sacher-Masoch’s novels: this is haute couture, a reverie of sensual opulence for its own sake. Sacher-Masoch’s Die Seelenfängerin (The Fisher of Souls) is about glamour. The motif of fur should not be taken too literally: yes, all the characters whose dress we read about do wear fur (even when they are peasants, when sheepskin is in order rather than fox or skunk) but one also must consider the importance of pearls, satin, gold embroidery, velvet, amber, silk, diamonds.

This is a typical description: Count Soltyk, who is fascinated by the deadly Dragomira, after a short-lived interest in Anitta, holds a masked ball at his castle, to which the beau monde of Kiev is invited. ‘Anitta was dressed splendidly in Parisian style: a dress of gold crêpe, which appeared strewn with golden threads, a velvet train of the same colour, lined with straw yellow satin held up behind with golden pins, a scarf of moiré of golden yellow garnished with golden fringes. A haze of little humming birds with diamante neck feathers seemed to flutter above the train of the dress. In her dark hair Anitta wore the same little

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55 To my knowledge, no novel of Sacher-Masoch’s other than Venus in Furs has been commented on.
56 Sacher-Masoch, Die Seelenfängerin. All translations into English are my own. There is no English translation of the novel. There is a French translation by L.-C. Colomb, which first appeared in 1889. An English translation of the title is ‘The Fisher of Souls’.
birds with a sparkling pin of diamonds. An opera cloak in ruby red plush, lined with blue fox and humming-bird feathers which shone like precious stones, completed the whole enchanting effect.\footnote{Sacher-Masoch, \textit{Die Seelenfängerin}, I. p.289: 'Anitta hatte eine herrliche Barifer Toilette, eine Robe aus Gold-krepp, gleichsam überschauert mit Gold-fädchen, mit einer Schleppe von goldigem Samt, die mit strohgelben Atlas gefüttert und rückwärts mit Goldnadeln aufgenommen und durch eine Schärpe von goldfarbigem Moiree mit Goldfranken befestigt war. Eine Wolke Heiner Kolibris mit diamantenem halsgefieder schien auf der Schleppe umherzuflattern. Im dunklem haar trug sie dieselben Heinem Vögel und eine blizende Diamantenadel. Ein Überwurf aus rubinroten Bläsch, mit Blauaufsch gefüttert und mit Kolibrifedern welche gleich kostbaren Edelfeinen funkell, verbränt, vollendete das bezamzberude Ensemble.'} The description has the flavour of the fashion magazine rather than the novel, even one of that period, in which description at some length might be expected. There is certainly a kind of fetishism here, a lascivious, obsessional recounting of every detail. Under the dazzlement of her attire, Anitta seems to disappear. We read nothing of her facial expression, her posture, or even her physical characteristics. The diamond pin, the gold moiré stole, the extraordinarily complex construction of the back of the dress, are Anitta, stand in for her and establish her power both as a beautiful woman and as wealthy heiress of the Oginski family. As the wearer of gold, she eclipses even her rival Dragomira, though the latter is wearing seven strings of pearls and an outfit trimmed with ermine. The relative ranks of the two women within Kiev society is signified, and wealth, for Sacher-Masoch, is linked to the attractiveness of the woman character. In \textit{Venus in Furs} Wanda is a woman of immense wealth, while Severin is of relatively modest means. Zesim, the male protagonist of \textit{Die Seelenfängerin}, and beloved of both Anitta and Dragomira, is too poor to be welcomed as a suitor by the Oginski family. Money, then, is translated into feminine sexual power via the luxury, sensuality, glamour and opulence of exquisite clothing. The wearing of ballgowns, of fur and precious jewels puts the women at the centre of a stage set as gorgeous as a Hollywood extravaganza. This is not to say
that men are not given, as it were, a clothes allowance in Sacher-Masoch’s novel. The first description of Count Soltyk, for example, has him ‘shod with boots of red Moroccan leather, with a long robe of yellow satin lined and trimmed with ermine.’\textsuperscript{58} He is wearing a fez. Soltyk is the wealthy, distinguished figure who rivals Dragomira in cruelty but who, despite his immense spending power, cannot wrest the centre stage from this literally fatal woman. If Anitta and Dragomira are the ones whose wardrobes are exhaustively described throughout the novel, it is at least partly because for a woman within such a society, clothes are the primary means to dramatise oneself, to draw attention to one’s face and body, to capture the masculine imagination and to create a powerful, seductive aura.

Count Soltyk has other means to exercise his power. He punishes an employee who has not consulted him properly by having him tied up in a kennel and forced to bark like a dog every ten minutes, for example. As a man, he can scorn marriage and exploit his position: ‘A woman is not capable of filling my life... she is like a flower that I pick and then throw away, nothing more.’\textsuperscript{59} All this is quite legitimate for a man in his position, indeed it makes him, if anything, even more sought-after. For a woman to be powerful means articulating her personal charisma through dressing the part of \textit{grande dame}, and Sacher-Masoch’s male characters bear witness to the masculine weakness for this. In the hands of Dragomira, who exploits her feminine wiles to the utmost, Zesim and the Count become hopelessly infatuated, lacking any power of resistance, suffering a complete loss


\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., I, p.103: ‘Ein Weib ist nicht im Stande, mein Leben auszufüllen... es ist mir eine Blume, die ich breche und dannwegwerfe, weiter nichts.’
of will, dwindling in stature to the level of manipulated puppets. Few novels of the time, to
my knowledge, presented women as the courageous, resourceful protagonists while male
characters remained supine on the sidelines, showing up mainly as willing victims of
female caprice. One wonders if Sacher-Masoch’s men readers relished seeing their sex
represented in so unflattering a light: Krafft-Ebing may not have been the only one to wish
such behaviour exiled into clinical pathology. Dragomira, member of an extreme puritan
sect, the Himmelspendern (the Dispensors of Grace), works to ‘convert’ sinners, through
drawing them in, then torturing and finally killing them. She meets no opposition to her
plans in any man - Zesim, the Count, even the formidably intelligent Jesuit priest Glinski,
become putty in her hands. Anitta, her rival for Zesim, does confront her, accusing her
fearlessly of her crimes, in a verbal duel that prefigures the novel’s dénouement. After
their clash of words, the two women return home, and each is described in the
particularity of their personal strength. Dragomira becomes, once again, ‘the stylish and
coquettish society woman, with all the young men of Kiev at her feet’; as for Anitta,
‘Immediately she felt her full strength. Her brave and innocent spirit did not balk for a
single moment at the idea of the struggle which she had begun.’

The rival women form an opposing double. Dragomira is glacial and heartless towards
men, and, for that matter, women too. Her attachment to Zesim is founded on a feeling of
pity for his inferiority. She is clever, successful, active and ruthless, the *femme fatale*

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60 Ibid., II, p.99: ‘die vornehme, kokette Weltdame... zu deren Füßen die ganze Jugend Kievs lag.’
61 Ibid., II, p.99: ‘Sie fühlte mit einem Male ihre ganze Kraft. Ihre muthige, reine Seele schreckte vor
dem Kampfe, den sie begonnen, keinen Augenblick zurück.’
62 Cf. Sacher-Masoch, *Die Seelenfängerin* II, p.223: ‘...her heart spoke loudly for Zesim, perhaps
precisely because she knew she was superior to him, because he appeared weak and indecisive. She felt a
kind of tender pity for him...’ ('...ihr Herz sprach laut für Zesim, und vielleicht gerade deshalb, weil sie
sich ihm überlegen sah, weil er ihr schwach und schwankend erschein. Sie fühlte eine Ort zärtliches Mitleid
mit ihm.')
that Wanda, in *Venus in Furs*, could never become. Anitta counterposes Dragomira's fascinating malice with a far less seductive goodness. She is repeatedly described as a child, though actually the two women appear similar in age, at the beginning of womanhood. A child-woman, she is playful, innocent, loving and bound by the rules of convention and family. Anitta and Dragomira are the double woman also represented, as I shall show in the following chapter, by Cranach as Lucretia and Judith, one woman wounded and the other wounding, one self-abnegating mother, the other rapacious man-killer. 63 This is a projection of a male demand which is paradoxical, a demand upon women to enthral and fascinate, to manipulate desire, and at the same time, to be the constant, selfless nurse. Desire arises out of the insecurity that Dragomira creates, in her cold refusal not just of Count Soltyk, but of any ordinary kind of love. She says: 'Perhaps it is just my way of loving, this longing to feel you die in my arms, this desire to smother you with my kisses'. 64 Yet at some point, a point which can never be specified in general but which, in this novel, I would identify with Dragomira's sacrifice of Soltyk, desire plays itself out. Where in *Venus in Furs* it was Severin's whipping by the Greek which exhausted the narrative drive at the same time as satisfying it, in *Die Seelenfängerin* the Count's torture and killing complete the masochistic agenda. The Count, of the two men protagonists, is the one whose love for Anitta most quickly evaporates upon meeting Dragomira - whose nerve and virile pride allow him to move, push him towards the insecure, desiring position. Desire, then, in this novel, goes far further than it does in *Venus in Furs*, resulting in death itself at the hand of the beloved. Dragomira and Anitta

63 See chapter five.
64 Sacher-Masoch, *Die Seelenfängerin*, II, p.229: 'Vielleicht ist dies mein Art zu lieben, diese Sehnsucht, dich in meinen Armen zu töten, dieser Wunsch, dich mit Küssen zu ersticken.'
represent conflicting tendencies, the one anarchic and dynamic, the other stable and, from
the point of view of narrative, unproductive. The triumph of love embodied in Anitta’s
killing of Dragomira in their final confrontation marks the end of the novel. Love means
that nothing more is to happen. It also means that nobody is to be tortured to death.

The question raised here is about the demarcation line between masochism and love. Is
it possible clearly to draw the distinction, as from a philosophical position Jean-Paul Sartre
does in the following statement? He writes: ‘Au lieu de projeter d’absorber l’autre en lui
conservant son altérité, je projeterai de me faire absorber par l’autre et de me perdre en sa
subjectivité pour me débarrasser de la mienne. L’entreprise se traduira sur le plan concret
par l’attitude masochiste.’

Sartre sees the masochist as someone who wants to become
a pure object, who refuses to be anything more. Seeing love as an attempt to capture the
freedom of another, he sees masochism as wishing the other person to remain radically
free. At the same time the masochist, for Sartre, insists upon being an instrument to be
used, so that ‘plus je me sentirai dépassé vers d’autres fins, plus je jouirai de l’abdication
de ma transcendance.’

If one follows this logic, it becomes apparent why it is the
proud, egotistic and cruel Count Soltyk who succumbs to a masochistic fascination for
Dragomira rather than Zesim, the weaker man. If the taste for freedom and a strong
subjectivity are particularly dominant, presumably a correspondingly high level of pleasure
is to be gained from their renunciation. Sartre describes masochism as ‘une espèce de
vertige, non devant le précipice de roc et de terre, mais devant l’abîme de la subjectivité
d’autrui.’ The description is close to certain descriptions of a response to the sublime in

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66 Ibid., p. 418.
67 Ibid.
nature: a feeling of being overwhelmed to the point of disorientation that also conjures up Bersani’s notion, discussed in chapter one, of a traumatic, erotic moment of response to stimulus.

Certainly something of this sort appears to inflect the Count’s feelings. ‘He seemed to be in one of those dreams where one is lost in a strange country, in unknown and eerie buildings where the ceiling seems to press down from above; one seeks with nameless fear to escape through openings that become ever more narrow, one climbs a staircase whose steps become ever higher and steeper, and once arriving at the top, one is thrown into space, to cleave the air without wings.’

Soltyk is no longer master of himself. He does not know what to do with himself. He is described as taking up each activity only to drop it again precipitately, coming and going as if pursued by the Furies or by a pack of hounds. No longer himself, the Count has not yet become the instrument or object of Dragomira - although this is to be his ultimate fate - and has to undergo the discomfort of not knowing where to place himself, having no particular place. The vertigo that Sartre describes is, I think, linked to masochism itself, but also to love, when one subjectivity is also profoundly affected by another.

The conceptual model of a love/masochism polarity finds favour with Pascal Quignard whose *L'ère du balbutiement*, a response to Deleuze’s commentary on Sacher-Masoch, rejects psychoanalytic models, going for a more philosophical view of the literary work. For Quignard, ‘il est clair, tout d’abord, que cette structure ébauchée de l’amour se fonde

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68 Sacher-Masoch, *Die Seelenjägerin*, I, p.229: ‘Ihm war zu Muthe wie im Traume, wo man in einer wildfremden Gegend, in unbekannten, unheimlichen Gebäuden umherirrt, die Gewölbe auf sich lasten fühlt, in namenloser Angst sich durch Öffnungen zwängt, die sich immer dichter zusammen schließen, Treppen ersteigt, die bei jedem schritte höher und steiler werden, und sich endlich hoch oben in die Luft hinabstürzt, um ohne Flügel durch den Äther zu fliegen.’
sur une dialectique bloquée, une dialectique de l’arrachement, irréductible, bref, une non-dialectique, mais l’axe même du conflictuel. C’est donc, quoi qu’il arrive, que la relation moi-autrui sera irrésolue, renvoyant perpétuellement de l’angoisse à l’aliénation. 69 For Quignard, masochism appears where the attempt at love breaks down, initiating another attempt at a different kind of assimilation between two subjectivities. Masochism, in this reading, is the inverse of love.

It is certainly true that Soltyk’s fascination for Dragomira only begins after a period during which he has felt himself to be in love with Anitta, and has been continually rejected. Zesim, too, follows this pattern: Anitta refuses to elope with him, and he returns to Dragomira. Yet once Dragomira has begun to exert herself and the two men have fallen under her spell, Anitta is almost written out of the narrative. Sartre’s model is of a love which is active, aspiring, and, I would say, rather masculine, contrasted with its failure in masochism. If the risky space of desire is, as Leo Bersani argues, 70 constituted by a self-shattering which is essentially masochistic, then all forms of desire are masochistically inflected. Masochism is not a failure of love, it may even be always within love, since if masochism overreaches itself, love refuses narrativity, remaining blissfully still as in the smile of Leonardo’s madonnas. Love, too, has a sinister side - love, too, can be fatal. The apostle of the Himmelspendern says to Dragomira: ‘You have not sought this love like a joy or a pleasure, it came over you in spite of yourself, like a destiny. You struggled against it, and now it causes you pain and anguish.’ 71 Dragomira, in love with

69 Quignard, L’être du balbutiement, p.132.
70 See chapter one.
Zesim, feels a mysterious anguish. This cruel girl feels her love for him as 'a fate stronger than herself, stronger than her will.'

For someone like Dragomira, love may be experienced masochistically. She is always moving: where Anitta is solidly centred in the home of her parents, her rival moves between lodgings in Kiev, her mother’s house, the many secret buildings from ruined castles to mountain caves occupied by the *Himmelspendern*, and the castle of the Count. Her need to move, to battle with the elements, to pit her wits against hostile forces, strongly emerges in a passage in which she rides out on horseback into the forest at night, into the wind and snow. She enjoys having to establish control over her rebellious mount: the savagery of the elements calms her senses: the wind and snow gradually diminish as if her will had extinguished their power, and a band of hungry, howling wolves which takes her for its prey is no match for her - she has not forgotten her revolver. The wolves are compared to dogs who chase a noble animal, and this description also fits the men who chase Dragomira: Zesim, the Count, and a third suitor, Sessawin. The motif of the chase, incidentally, is also figured more widely in the novel, where the focus of law and order pursue the sect to which she belongs, a grouping of men and women who conduct nefarious and clandestine activities, a kind of early literary version of today’s S/M subcultures which critique normative sexual practices and whose activities may be criminalised, as, for example, in the recent Spanner case.

Yet Dragomira, despite all, is not cold: she responds to her admirers, even passionately. But even having married Soltyk and given herself up to a dream of love with

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72 Ibid., I, p.221: ‘ein Verhängis, daß stärker war als sie selbst, als ihren eigenen Wille’.
73 See Thompson, *Sadomasochism* for a discussion of the criminalisation of S/M.
him, she does not hesitate for a moment to deliver him to his fate at the hands of the apostle. If Dragomira can act, rather than react (which is the position left to Anitta), it is because she has ideas, she has loyalties. No man can possess her fully, because she is possessed already by an ideal. The deadliness of her doctrine gives it all the more authority, as an allegiance to death itself, envisaged as a pure spirituality in contrast with the vice of the world. Dragomira clearly articulates her position as being equally against ‘blind, dead religious faith, which attaches itself to forms devoid of meaning’ as against unbelief, ‘for which there is nothing sacred any longer’ and ‘which weighs everything up, calculates everything, analyses everything.’

More than any other character in the novel, she is an intellectual, who has made a lucid assessment of the world, whose interests and views are large. Much of what makes the novel gripping is the edge between fascination and admiration for Dragomira and horror at her murderous activities. The passage describing the ride in the forest, for example, resuscitates the reader’s sympathies with her immediately after the horror of her murder of a sick woman.

One thing that differentiates Die Seelenfängerin from Venus in Furs is the centrality of the religious theme. This appears in a double-edged way as a critique of wordliness in Dragomira’s terms, and also as an idealism turned into psychosis, a space of delusion and murder. Dragomira says that she punishes and kills in the name of God, ‘without pity, but also without hatred’. During the killing of a victim, she is described as having only one thought, that being to serve her God. In the sect to which she belongs, the woman is considered purer, higher and better than a man. As the fisher of souls, whose task is to

75 Ibid., II, p.202: ‘ohne mitleid, aber auch ohne haß.’
impersonate an elegant woman of the world in order to attract victims for the sect, Dragomira can enjoy the impure power of being the centre of sexual attention. This double position is another indication of her essential freedom, her capacity to move through varying terrain. Where Wanda in the earlier novel was compared to Venus, Dragomira is here described as ‘a goddess from a Titian painting’; she is Diana hunting Actaeon. The forces in play here are different from those in the earlier novel, although central to both is the fascination for a beautiful, cruel woman. The struggle between love and death is no longer playful, and there is no male protagonist with whom the reader can fully identify.

We are given access to the consciousness of all of the major characters, most of all, in fact, to Dragomira’s.

This later novel by Sacher-Masoch has shown how a purer form of literary masochism no longer needs a central masochist. The woman torturer, whom Deleuze calls a pure element of masochism, is no longer the prey of the male but the huntress of men. Anitta’s playful game of wolf with Zesim becomes Dragomira’s murderous persecution of the chief of police Bedrosseff, in a ‘wild hunt’. At the same time this is a more extremely masochistic novel, from the male point of view. The reader is no longer reassured of the woman’s physical and intellectual inferiority: on both counts Dragomira wins hands down.

Severin was a stand-in for the reader, as the narrator to whom one remained affiliated throughout. In this novel, identifications are diversified and the reader has to fully assume the masochistic position, a position demanded by the dominance of Dragomira and the fascination she exerts.

76 Ibid., I, p.116: ‘einer Göttin Titian’s.’
77 Ibid., II, p.141: ‘die wilde Jagd.’
Could it be argued, against Deleuze, that Dragomira is a sadist? Jean-Paul Corsetti’s introduction to the French edition emphasises the Gothic elements of the novel and links the description of Dragomira to the heroes of Sade. And this religious fanatic shares with Sade’s libertines a self-imputed coldness and horror of emotional engagement. Henryka is reproved for her enjoyment of cruelty: “‘What we do out of holy faith and pity, appears like a pleasant distraction to you... Suppress this evil desire, this love of blood’” Dragomira and Count Soltyk are described as sharing the common characteristics of pride and contempt for the world. And Dragomira’s sect ultimately murders a large number of people in a scene of mass human sacrifice. But Sade’s and Sacher-Masoch’s literary imaginations remain poles apart. Sacher-Masoch’s work, as I have argued already, oscillates between the sublime and the ideal: Sade’s is concerned with gross physical acts and a repulsive appetency. The sadist does not need to seduce, to fascinate, but imposes himself through force. The sadistic hero or heroine philosophises while his victim listens: Sacher-Masoch’s characters conduct flirtatious, subtly sinister conversations. And Sade’s protagonists lack clothes consciousness, whereas even Sacher-Masoch’s minor characters wear gorgeous outfits.

Ever-present in Sacher-Masoch’s world is a melancholia and escapism which knows itself to be such. The landscape itself, which Dragomira crosses on her many missions, is barren: ‘The endless muddy road crossed a desolate landscape where there was nothing to see but flocks of crows and stunted willows.’ In other descriptions, the hills and forests

79 Ibid., II, 180: ‘Was wir im heiligen Glauben und aus Erbarmen tun, erscheint dir wie eine angenehme Aufregung.’
80 Ibid., I, p.143: ‘einer grundlosen, kotigen Landstraße durch eine öde, nur von Krähschaaren und verkrüppelten Weiden belebte Gegend...’
are sinister, containing wild beasts and wolves. Across the grimness of this terrain, Zesim must pass to reach his mother’s welcoming hearth as the novel opens. Zesim believes that the natural world offers him the same peaceful, joyful welcome as his mother: but Dragomira shows him how cruel animals are to each other, and compares the universe to a gigantic sacrificial stone upon which all creatures suffer and pour out their blood. For her, existence itself is a purgatory, a view which Count Soltyk echoes: ‘one should not despise a beautiful dream. Life is only a dream, but an ugly one.’ The ugliness and barrenness of the world are beyond redemption: Zesim’s republicanism is treated with contempt as the manifestation of a feeble-minded optimism. The only possibility is the beautiful dream - and who but the poet himself can supply it?

When Oginski is asked by his wife to think of an original idea for a grand celebration, he goes for inspiration to an old college friend, now a poet. Half-dying of hunger, he is effectually bribed by half a dozen bottles of Bordeaux and a large paté. Having reflected for a moment, the poet produces ‘a shower of ideas of every kind, abundant as flowers in Spring, great, comical, baroque and sentimental.’ The unoriginality of the wealthy, the boredom and banality of their lives parallels the grim monotony of the steppes, the forest, a monotony in which deadly forces gather. The fecund and generous mind of the poet provides the only beauty in this order, which is too unintelligent to care about its limitations. Sacher-Masoch’s critique of worldiness is perfectly compatible with his recourse to the images and signs of wealth, the castle, the legions of servants, ostentation

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81 Ibid., II, p.30: ‘ein schöner Traum ist nicht zu verachten, das Leben ist auch nur ein Traum, aber ein häßlicher.’

82 Ibid., II, p.26: ‘So regnete es Einfälle jeder Art, wie Blüthen im Lenz, großartige und drollige, baroke und sentimentale...’
and display of all kinds. It is all a dream, and moments of self-consciousness tell us so, as when Anitta tells Count Soltyk that Dragomira was made for him, and that ‘you will live out a novel with her’, or when Zesim tells Anitta that she is living ‘in the world of a novel’. The dream may not ultimately be a pleasant one, may descend into realms of horror, but it is a way of going out of oneself, of désinvolture.

What is it that one wants to quit, to get out of? For Pascal Quignard, it is life itself, life in its univocality and the domestication of language. For him, the stammering of Sacher-Masoch’s male protagonists is the key to a reading of the novels as the transcription of an exalted desire for death. Stammering neither speaks nor remains silent. It is ‘tentative d’une mort individuelle, solitaire, proprement subjective’.

Quignard argues that stammering constructs a relationship between death and writing. For him, stammering, and the limit of language, is silence at the point of speaking, silence suspended within the word. This is not baby-babble which seeks the mother’s reassurance, but a mature speech which draws attention to the absences within language. The aim, through submission to a woman-mother, is to procure ‘une mort à quoi on s’affilie’. Death, the death at the heart of language, is what is greater than the universe. Within the pacifist and communitarian language are silences which contain a violence that it dissimulates, and Sacher-Masoch’s stammering exposes this deadly quality, thinks Quignard.

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83 Ibid., I, p.251: ‘Sie mit ihr einen Roman erleben werden.’
84 Ibid., II, p.5: ‘Sie leben in einer Romanwelt.’
85 Quignard, L’être du balbutiement, p.142
86 Ibid., p.51.
It is true that Sacher-Masoch’s world is one in which a confident, glamorous society is held in a kind of tension: internally it is threatened by an eroding tedium, externally, by the psychotic forces of extreme religiosity. Put on another level, the male characters are either overfed by mother-love or released into dangerously masochistic pursuits. The man who is loved is infantilised: the alternative is the fate of Holofernes at the hands of Judith.87 The fearful man, the stammerer, finds himself faced by death, unprotected by linguistic consensus. The contract in Venus in Furs employs a binding language, as if to map out the invisible risk, but there is no contract in Die Seelenfängerin, nothing either authorises or prevents Dragomira from killing the Count.

Quignard’s exposition, in my view, over-insists on the metaphor of the stammer. Certainly in neither the composition nor the language of the novels is any awkwardness or hesitation obvious. Formally, the novels have all the polished, assured elegance of the milieu they describe. Dissimulation is the word I would use to characterise Sacher-Masoch’s presentation of his central concerns, which Quignard rightly points out to be violence and death at the heart of a living entity. The language and form charmingly seduce, as does Dragomira in the Oginski drawing-room, while terrifyingly homicidal intentions are being pursued. The murders performed by the Himmelspendern are gruesome, but not, somehow, shocking: indeed the sacrifice of Soltyk is artistically staged. Sacher-Masoch, rather than creating a stammering text, displays a capacity for making us accept this horrible content with a minimal amount of perturbation.

The ending of the novel moves us back into a safely maternal space after the vertigo of Dragomira’s dominance, reversing the order of Venus of Furs which moves Severin into a

87 See chapter four.
patriarchal position. The doubling of the central couple in *Die Seelenfängerin* allows the author, and the reader, to have his cake and eat it - the reader follows Count Soltyk to his masochistic end, going far further down that path than Severin did, while in *Zesim*, the author allows at least one male figure to survive desire.

A reading of this later novel by Sacher-Masoch challenges any narrowly sexual definition of the masochistic, which it may be possible to construct from reading *Venus in Furs* alone. The element of supersensuality is missing. In this novel, torture is not demanded but braved, and the woman torturer is coolly efficient, fascinatingly invulnerable. This is not an erotic novel. Sacher-Masoch has gone further here than was previously possible in imagining those forms of Eros in which Thanatos is strongly present. The novel derives its *raison d’être* from the dynamism of a Dragomira whose devotion to an ideal disrupts the flat ugliness of existence. To Anitta, and her qualities of stasis, we return at the end, when there is no longer anywhere to go - an extra-textual fatality.

Masochism is what creates us as readers susceptible to excitement, charm, fascination, engagement, ready to allow ourselves to be taken over, *gripped* by a literary text. Sacher-Masoch’s novels are striking for this capacity of arresting us on the level of glittering, glamorous surface and that of self-conscious, melancholic depth. This century has seen writers denying the emotional, engaging, subjective elements in an attempt to gain the formal high ground. The sophistication of the two French writers that I look at in the following chapters is, however, no security against a readerly capacity for masochistic pleasure in their texts.
CHAPTER FOUR

Michel Leiris: L’âge d’homme

If masochism has deep roots in the literary tradition but particularly flourished in the late Romanticism popular at the end of the last century, what has happened to it during modernism? Both the French writers I want to look at in the next two chapters, Michel Leiris and Marguerite Duras, produce texts which are distinctly modernist in their uncertain fragmentation and their non-narrative, unpredictable structures. In Leiris’s L’âge d’homme, motifs familiar from a reading of Sacher-Masoch recur, but in a self-conscious, confessional, ironic form. How does Leiris present the masochistic imagination at work in this complex interweaving of myth and wry, self-derisory confession? Does his perspective on the act of writing challenge the boundaries between the text and lived experience? What version of the body emerges from his commitment to uncovering the erotic siting of the sacred? I hope to go some way towards answering these questions, at the same time showing a masochistic literature which moves towards new ways of thinking relationship in language.

Un problème le tourmentait, qui lui donnait mauvaise conscience et l’empêchait d’écrire: ce qui se passe dans le domaine de l’écriture n’est-il pas dénué de valeur si cela reste ‘esthétique’, anodin, dépourvu de sanction, s’il n’y a rien, dans le fait d’écrire une œuvre, qui soit un équivalent (et ici intervient l’une des images les plus chères à l’auteur) de ce qu’est pour le torero la corne acérée du taureau, qui
This passage from Michel Leiris, from the preface to *L'âge d'homme*, offers an exciting metaphor for the masochistic risk inherent in the writing and reading of a particular kind of literature. A demand precedes the creation of the work of art: an imperative to move out of a safe place, to place oneself in front of the bull’s horns, to make oneself into a target.

For the author, Leiris, writing is not possible unless it is necessary. His bad conscience prevents him from writing - he is *tormented* by the thought of a merely narcissistic extension into the world, of being a mere ballerina, displaying a self-enclosed, anodyne virtuosity. The bullfighter vulnerable to the goring horns of the bull is his chosen model - just as great a stylist, but all the while staring death in the face. The figure of the exquisite dancer is evidently a tempting identificatory possibility, a feminine identification which is displaced in favour of a masculine type, equally costumed, tutored, controlled, equally the object of spectacle, but a fighter, contesting the will and brute animal force of the bull. The bad faith associated with the wrong identification only disappears when replaced by a more masculine, confrontational stance. Yet the matador is an ambiguous figure. Faced with the superior strength, massiveness and aggressivity of the bull, the matador seems feminine, is capable of absorbing both gender projections.

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1 Leiris, *L'âge d'homme*, p. 10.
2 Cf. ‘Le matador, qui tire du danger couru occasion d’être plus brillant que jamais et montre toute la qualité de son style à l’instant qu’il est le plus menacé: voilà ce qui m’émerveillait, voilà ce que je voulais être.’ Ibid., p. 12.
This androgynous figure operates within a field of threat. The threat is that he may be pierced, opened up, penetrated, put to death, made to bleed, tossed by the bull. Leiris insists on the 'menace matérielle', the actuality of the threat as the thing which confers value upon what the matador/writer does, his performance. This gesture of the risk-taker seems to me qualitatively different from the Surrealist injunction 'épater le bourgeois': that frontal assault on stuffy conservatism lacks a dimension of reflexivity, easily slides into a kind of infantile megalomania. Such a position already reduces the other combatant by derision: in Leiris’ masochistic metaphor, the other is accorded respect.

Leiris proposes a different kind of engagement from the virile revolutionist position, offering an implosive awareness from within white, Western, bourgeois, masculinist society of its vitiated foundations. Michèle Richman\(^3\) shows how Leiris and his friend Bataille, dissident Surrealists, were conscious of the limitations of a position whereby the bourgeois would act as representative of the proletarian or oppressed group. Both men were interested in the erotic as a site of sacred intensity, breaking and transgressing the Western logos. If Africa is for Leiris a phantom, it is also a place where the significance of collective ceremonies is recognised, where the loss of this capacity to recognise the sacred in Western societies means that the bourgeois intellectual must take on the task. In so doing, the writer who is engaged in this way takes up a masochistic position on the political level, surrendering to the eroticised moment of the sacred, and sacrificing himself to the task, a thankless one for the ego.

\(^3\) Richman, 'Leiris' s L'âge d'homme: politics and the sacred.'
It is hard to express precisely the risk of the writer or artist who steps into a place of psychological threat, surrenders to the chaotic danger of overwhelming stimulus, faces his own death as a place for which representations are inadequate, and brings back from the experience an imprint or mark of that sacred in the form of a work of art which can be approached by others. This opening up involves an allowance of total vulnerability, a kind of vanishing which cannot occur without pain. Within the visual arts, the work of Andrea Fisher, who uses photographic images and installations, produces a similar chavirement to that offered by Leiris’s writing: images of the beautiful corpse of a woman war victim force the viewer to face the erotic investment in systematic violence and genocide. This melancholic witnessing of continuing brutalisation - Fisher has produced works in response to the Gulf war and the massacres in Croatia - subverts conventional war photography in that it implicates both artist and viewer, referring to a generalised violence in whose shadow we live from day to day.

*L’âge d’homme* is an encounter with all the things which are not the self - writing, other people, death - in the form of an autobiography, a book about the self. The novel is marked throughout by an extreme self-consciousness, the sense of an ironic control and manipulation of language, that leaves us few opportunities of reading between the lines, of finding unintended meanings, reading ‘slips’ within the text. All of this has already been done by the author, this ‘reserved figure on the sidelines of Surrealism, Existentialism and modern French poetry’. Though the name of this particular game may be erotic excess (*L’âge d’homme* is dedicated to Georges Bataille), Leiris never loses his head, nor can he help mocking his own effusions, holding himself up to ridicule for the very things that he

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most longs for. Part of Leiris wants to hold everything in, but another part wants tears, blood, faeces and sperm to flow.

The young Leiris is susceptible to tears. In his family, to cry is considered a sign of sensitivity, and the child Michel gives way to tears while listening to his brother playing the violin. At thirteen he is discovered in tears, face buried in the pillow, by his sister, to whom he confesses his unhappy love for a woman over thirty. And after crying, when he has sobbed sufficiently, he finds himself overtaken by a calm euphoria, as if, he says, 'mes pleurs m’avaient régénérés.' His love of tears is bound up with his attractions to women, and in an adolescent journal he writes of longing to weep in a woman’s arms, to weep without fear of mockery, to feel sure of being consoled. However infantile such a wish might be, Leiris comments, he persists in desiring it. But the discharge and subsequent refreshment offered to the young Michel by his facility to cry, to engage the consoling attentions of his mother or elder sister, is lost later on, a loss which is deeply felt by the adult Leiris, who perceives with disgust that only physical pain can make him cry.

This is Leiris’s predicament, a solitude in search of its annihilation, self folded in upon itself, without satisfaction, yet hardly able to open up generously to the outside, a predicament of which he has the most intimate knowledge: 'Si je reste replié sur moi-même, ce n’est jamais sans le regret d’un abandon, dont j’éprouve une envie véhémentement.

On the one hand is a sedated boredom, on the other, terror. Terror, the terror of the toreador in front of the bull: the justifiable fear before the unknown: fear of the exotic, of

5 Leiris, L’âge d’homme, p.150.
6 ‘Souvent, comme par le passé, je voudrais pouvoir sangloter mais, de jour en jour, je m’aperçois avec un peu plus de dégoût qu’il n’y a guère que la douleur corporelle qui soit capable de m’arracher des cris.’ Ibid., p.152.
7 Ibid., p.137.
women, of death, of everything. Psychoanalyst J.-B. Pontalis says of Leiris that: ‘Il y a en effet une forme de conscience de soi, qui est synonyme de la conscience de la mort, la mort étant négation du particulier... la mort et le moi sont les deux termes d’une seule obsession.’ The portrait of Leiris that L’âge d’homme paints is of a fearful, comically self-protective child and man, someone with a heightened awareness of death, both externally, in the form of a generalised paranoia, and internally, as the self-disgusted sense of personal limitation. Though Leiris states that he attains to a certain kind of purity (because he is too profoundly lazy, he says, to rally the force required for success in impurity) in fact all emotions seem complex rather than simple, so that if the motive for writing the book arose from ‘le désir de m’exposer (dans tous les sens du terme)’, the opening inventory of the narrator’s physical attributes is far from narcissistically self-approving - it includes a large head, narrow shoulders, short legs, and hardly any musculature.

Much of the exquisite humour and wit of the autobiography arises from the contamination, or traversal of one pole by its apparent opposite: for example, Michel, aged nine, when presented with his elder sister’s newborn baby, is afflicted with a horror born of the sense that he is no longer the youngest: ‘Je saisissais que je ne représentais plus la dernière génération, j’avais la révélation du vieillissement; je ressentais une grande tristesse et un malaise...’ The passage goes on to describe how the narrator cannot

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8 Pontalis, _Après Freud_, p. 326.
9 ‘J’ai toujours été peu turbulent, encore moins batailleur, en général plutôt craintif, maussade, criailleur, guère besoin de me recommander: “ne caresse pas les chiens dans les rues!” “ne joue pas avec les allumettes!” ou “regarde bien avant de traverser!” j’avais beaucoup trop peur d’être mordu, brûlé, ou écrasé.’ Leiris, _L’âge d’homme_, p. 120.
10 Ibid., p. 21.
11 Ibid., p. 28.
tolerate the idea of procreation, could not bear the thought of a sexual act that would lead to impregnation, and considers love and death so close that all carnal love, by intensifying the sense of life, must bring something deadly with it. The perception of death as most markedly present in the strongest manifestations of life gives rise to an implosive irony which while containing this regrettable knowledge, displays the narrator’s shortcomings.

Pontalis’s commentary on Leiris emphasises, as we have seen, the obsessionality at work, and he remarks that there is a sterility here: in contrast with the example of Proust, he finds that here is no metamorphosis accompanying the degradation which occurs through the temporal investigation of a life. Leiris’s project does not pretend to open up such a metamorphosis, but I would argue that there is an intent search for meaning. A relentless probing consciousness allows no sentimental investment, only the feeling that something is needed and lacking. There is a foreclosure of affect which Leiris seems to obliquely refer to in the dream he reports at the end of the book. In it, he is dressed awkwardly, with a hat, gloves, an old fashioned overcoat, while his friends are dressed informally. The woman friend he accompanies tells him that she loves him, but that she does not like his way of dressing. He replies in the dream that: ‘Il est nécessaire de construire un mur autour de soi, à l’aide du vêtement.’12 There are barriers around this identity, barriers which protect but which also deny a direct physical relation to the world. Clothing is as essential to Leiris as it is to Sacher-Masoch, but in the French writer’s case, does not celebrate a dream or fetishise wealth, and rather fails to do its job of enhancing bodily attractiveness. For example, in the opening passage already cited, the narrator says how much he loves to dress with the utmost elegance. Unfortunately, however, he goes...

12 Ibid., p.208.
on, 'A cause des défauts que je viens de relever dans ma structure... je me juge d'ordinaire profondément inélégant; j'ai horreur de me voir à l'improviste dans une glace car, faute de m'y être préparé, je me trouve à chaque fois d'une laideur humiliante.' Like Simone Weil, Leiris appears to view his physical attributes in a particularly harsh light - in photographs he appears personable - but in a characteristic move here, he opens up a point of access through a narcissistic avowal only to turn back upon himself and attack the precise point of vulnerability. The narcissistic pleasure of dressing well becomes the presentation of the self as unspeakably abject. Every move outward seems programmed to result in an inward shattering or loss: thus the need for the wall. But the construction of a psychic shell restricts and denies energy, making Leiris oscillate between stagnation and the intensity of the role of wounded man, 'l'homme blessé'.

The sterility of his manhood, of a mind immured in itself and incapable of reaching out is what Leiris documents with humour and occasionally, desperation, in L'âge d'homme. Having traveled to Africa, (upon the suggestion of Simone Weil) in search of a real encounter with the other, he finds he cannot escape himself. Psychoanalysis leads back to the same place. To move away from it means risking death, and he says that he has come to realise that only a certain fervour could save him, but that the world lacks anything for which he would be capable of dying. This position is, however, undermined by the symbolic deaths staged in the narrative, or the collapse of boundaries which allows the narrator to abandon himself, which shows that he is indeed capable of this fervour. Erotic love is the most privileged site for this opening of the defensive shell: 'Je ne conçois guère

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Sadism and masochism are not vices for him, but means to achieve a more intense reality.\textsuperscript{15}

Masochism is in fact far more central to \textit{L'âge d'homme} than sadism. The sensibility depicted is deeply masochistic, and this is readable at more than one level. The taste for an exposure to an objectifying gaze, even if it is his own - 'mon goût pour ce genre amère de contemplation'\textsuperscript{16} - is a moving force behind the autobiographical project: Leiris stripping bare his soul and preparing to be subjected to a ridicule solicited in advance. This is a particular way of setting up a relation to a reader, in a similar way to Severin in \textit{Venus in Furs}, where the reader enters into a collusion with the narrator. In this masculine pact, women and the erotic can be spoken of. The fraternal nature of Leiris's project is hinted at in his dedication to Georges Bataille. It is more explicitly suggested in Leiris's presentation, in 1938, to the Collège de Sociologie, founded by Bataille, entitled 'Le sacré dans la vie quotidienne'.\textsuperscript{17} I will briefly look at this fraternal address in an attempt to assess how important a feature it is.

For Leiris, the question of what is sacred is immediately redefinable as, what is his sacred? The essay begins with the rejection of a commonly held in favour of a self-constructed religion, one rooted in the family. He seeks signs of the sacred in symbolic objects. The father's top hat, revolver and moneybox come first; then the kitchen range, symbol of maternity, attractive in its warmth but feared for its capacity to burn if touched.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p.76.
\textsuperscript{15} 'D'une manière générale, sadisme, masochisme, etc. ne constituent pas pour moi des "vices" mais seulement des moyens d'atteindre une plus intense réalité.' Ibid., pp.197-8.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p.26.
\textsuperscript{17} Leiris, 'Le sacré dans la vie quotidienne'.
Mother and father are the divinities; but the elaboration of the sacred order takes place under the signs of anality and fraternity.

There is a self-deprecatory humour in the description of long secret sessions spent locked in the bathroom in complicity with his brother, and the elaboration of ‘toute une mythologie quasi-secrète’ during the time of excretion every evening. And in referring to a ‘maison des hommes’ where the initiates gather to transmit their secrets to one another, as he with his brother, he seems to be poking fun at the ambition of the all-male Collège; as also when commenting on the brothers’ fascination for the flushing mechanism and the toilet bowl, reflecting that if they had been older and more erudite, they would have had no hesitation in considering themselves as being in direct communication with the ‘divinités chtonniennes’. Maurice Blanchot’s essay on L’âge d’homme compares it to Rousseau’s Confessions, in that both bring to the light of day that which is hidden, to make the day judge of this hidden depth or profundity, and to discharge oneself of this occult life upon the day. He notes the ‘volupté trouble’ of putting everything into clarity. Blanchot’s terms are ‘caché’ and ‘occult’, but they are close to Leiris’s sense of the sacred as forbidden and secret, as what takes place behind the bathroom door, when two boys tirelessly search out the solutions to the various enigmas obsessing them in the sexual domain.

If Leiris’s elaboration of his personal sense of the sacred, if the grounding of his literary investigations is a fraternal discourse, an address to another man, should L’âge d’homme

\[18\] Ibid., p.63
\[19\] Ibid., p.64
\[20\] Ibid., p.65.
\[21\] Blanchot, ‘Regards d’outre tombe’ in La part du feu.
\[22\] Ibid., p.241.
be considered not only a work about masculinity, but one which excludes women from participating as readers? To put this differently, if Leiris seeks a complicity with a male reader, what kind of address, if any, does he make to women? This is one of the questions I will try to address here.

Leiris’s prologue presents the writing of the autobiography as a simple confession based on the painting by Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Lucretia and Judith*. The hero of *L’âge d’homme*, he tells us, is Holofernes, whose severed head Judith, on the right hand of the diptych, negligently dangles by its hair. Michel Leiris is, then, identified with Holofernes, not only the wounded but the decapitated man, the man who has lost his head, who has lost control. Holofernes has become the sacrifice of Judith, a sacred, bloody trophy, he has been betrayed by bodily lust. Aside, then, from the confessional masochism, there is here an identificatory masochism - Leiris will continually characterise himself as wounded, vulnerable and erotically subjected. The crucial reference to the Cranach diptych allows him to explore this eroticism and project it upon the two figures in the painting. The first heroine of the book, Lucretia, is an emblem of the wounded closure upon the self, offering up a sense of aestheticised violation to the ravishment of the gaze. Leiris says that perhaps the only beautiful thing in life is to have been infinitely ravaged. In fact the writing of this book grew out of the psychoanalytic treatment he underwent for a year, after a failed suicide attempt. *L’âge d’homme*’s modesty and wit belie the anguish of Michel Leiris’s manhood. Leiris, then, really is a wounded man and *L’âge d’homme* is a truthful book, truthfulness being essential to his idea of writing something beyond the purely literary, something naked, which contained ‘une réalité humaine’. 23 For Leiris this truth resides in

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23 Leiris, *L’âge d’homme*, p.10. See also my conclusion.
the erotic core of the work, the psychic and sexual confrontation with a woman. ‘La sexualité m’apparissait alors comme la pierre angulaire dans l’édifice de la personnalité’, he writes, indicating that personality, self-revelation is what is at stake, not a writing for its own sake. The form of the writing is determined by the needs of the erotic complex to be staged, and Leiris sees himself as strictly adhering to the rules of bullfighting. To be avoided is ‘une simple boucherie’; the attitudes of the torero, the scrupulous ritual he observes, the exact positioning of the feet, the casual, slow manipulation of the cape are translated into a severe literary classicism which allows him to express himself in a tone of the utmost objectivity.

If Leiris himself uses the rather extreme metaphor of bullfighting to set out his literary project, a critic from philosophy, Jean-Luc Nancy, emphasises the everyday aspect of the work. Nancy values Leiris’s work precisely because it makes no attempt to pass itself off as being interesting or exceptional. ‘Or voici dont il s’agit: tout est si quotidien que la catégorie de ‘quotidien’ est vaine. Le quotidien passe toute mesure, toute raison du quotidien est de l’exceptionel.’ If one terms a thing banal, one keeps the boundaries in place, one asserts that there is something beyond the banal. Yet in fact this very everyday quality which Leiris expresses is what captures the imagination, what contains the exceptional. Nancy puts forward a rather anti-literary argument: as if literature were merely belles lettres, he writes, ‘rien, nulle littérature... c’est à dire: de toute les façons de croire qu’en mettant un panonceau “les Iris” on a transfiguré sa médiocre villa, et de ses

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24 Ibid., p. 19.
25 Ibid.
26 Nancy, ‘Les iris’.
27 Ibid., p. 50.
Il y a des milliers, He aligns himself with Leiris's own suspicion of the aesthetic nature of literature, his expressed wish to avoid the 'grâces vaines de ballerine', but Nancy goes further than the autobiographer, who nevertheless wants to fascinate another person, a reader. A philosophical perspective like Nancy's leaves aside the question of eroticism, the electrical undercurrents which charge the descriptions of minor events with a capacity to fascinate, amuse and seduce. He sees, rather, in Leiris, something which defends against death, the writing of existence, an existence which continues from one moment to the next. Nancy's reason for not killing himself is that 'à quelque chose d'infinie on demeure obstinément... exposé'. This echoes the exposure of self, warts and all, that Leiris has signalled as a crucial motivation for the work. Nancy sees Leiris's work as an everyday coming and going of signs, pulverised by insignificance. Valorising the writing of the murmur, the writing which is like shifting sands, invalidating magnitudes, Nancy seems to contrast the project of this writing with suicide, perhaps in contrast with Blanchot who sees writing as a particularly privileged form of suicide.

For Nancy, Leiris, like Oedipus before him, puzzles over the riddle of the Sphinx, but without violence or self-blinding. His essay only touches on the Cranach painting in that it meditates on blindness and vision. The eye's iris, he says, is caught by the void, never sees its own vision. There is no path to the self. Existence is exceptional, he says, but this cannot be seen. Everything else can be seen, and he is on the side of abandonment to the pleasure of the gaze. However, for Nancy, the gaze is 'un long regard impressionable qui

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28 Ibid., p.54.
29 Leiris, L'âge d'homme, p.10.
30 Ibid., p. 50.
Michel Leiris is gazing at something rather different: a painting of two desirable women, one who has just murdered her lover while the other, who has been raped, is about to kill herself. The pleasure of this gaze is troubled by intensely masochistic identifications, by the coupling of Eros and Thanatos in two differing instances. Nancy’s take on Leiris, then, manages to deal with life and death, but at the expense of dedramatising the extremities and intensities which make the text so exciting. He avoids the erotic disquiet which gives *L’âge d’homme* its capacity to organise disparate material, ignores the vertiginous quality which comes through the meticulous attention to the unexceptional. Nancy seems to have been taken in by Leiris’s dissimulating strategies, by his low key, defused writing style and method. *L’âge d’homme* is neither, as Nancy would have it, on the side of existence, nor is it about death, but about sensing a relationship, an intermeshing, a threat and a promise in the same moment.

Why is accession to manhood crucial to this autobiography? For Leiris, as for Sacher-Masoch, femininity is central, the figures of Judith and Lucretia representing the two kinds of women the narrator desires. The woman figure dominates, as locus of difficult, destructive and self-destructive longings. But aside from the external staging of woman as sexual object, there is also a question of gender unease, or of problematic identifications with women. It is possible that the two run together in the impulse of the masochistic man to throw himself under the domination of a woman, where a submerged feminine

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32 Problematic because, as Jonathan Dollimore argues, in a heterosexual economy, the male is discouraged from identifying with the sex he desires, namely women: ‘that would equal effeminacy’ (Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, p.305). Thus cross-gender identifications challenge or subvert dominant sexual ideologies.
identification is allowed to take over, though projected onto the figure of the dominatrix, who stands in for the man's own femininity. Feminist psychoanalytic work such as that of Jessica Benjamin's offer a theoretical model which views male identity as a secondary phenomenon, since it is achieved by overcoming a primary identification with the mother. The boy develops his gender and identity by means of establishing discontinuity and difference from the person to whom he is most attached. This disidentification, Benjamin says, explains the repudiation of the mother which underlies conventional masculine identity formation. The other, especially the female other, now tends to be related to as object, and the emotional attunement and bodily harmony which characterised the male infant's exchange with the mother now threaten his identity. As an adult, any profound experience of emotional or physical communion, such as erotic love, may evoke the danger of the loss of masculine identity. Femininity becomes the part of masculinity which is repressed and mastered. Due to the loss of continuity with women, men may encounter a woman they desire as both idealised and devalued, a dangerous siren who threatens to overwhelm, and who will be defended against by holding onto the precious identification with the father. If, as Benjamin suggests, the very intensity of masculine desire is predicated on the internal crushing of the feminine, it may be, for some men at least, that no paternal identification, however precious, can intervene when the repressed returns externally: the male masochist cannot defend himself against desire, must let himself go. The male masochist, to his credit, has problems with what it means to be a man. More traditionally masculine men may redirect their libido into safer areas - team sports such as football or rugby guarantee gender identities by their exclusion of women, combined with

Benjamin, The Bonds of Love; see my chapter one for further reference to this.
aggressive (denied) homosexual bodily contact. These men represent an acceptable norm: lacking the masochistic capacity to risk being overwhelmed by desire, few become writers of great literature, nor has psychoanalysis found them pathological. Masochism may be masculinity’s saving grace, a passing excursion into the unknown. For Leiris, it follows a projection on to the two central female figures, chaste Lucretia and inexorable Judith.

Leiris’s fascination with the Cranach painting may stem from its staging of the deadly impasse of manhood, which represses its identificatory love of the mother internally, while finding itself overwhelmed by its own returning desire which transforms the sexual object into a femme fatale, a Judith. Leiris quotes from the Larousse dictionary the entry on Lucas Cranach the Elder that: ‘Il brille surtout dans les visages de femmes. Les nus de ses corps de femmes, les Ève, les Lucrèce, sont des morceaux très délicats.’34 Richard Howard translates this as: ‘He is particularly successful in rendering women’s faces. His female nudes, such as Eve and Lucretia, are very delicate.’35 A stricter translation would be that the female nudes were very delicate morsels. It is certainly the eroticism of the painting which strikes Leiris. While concurring that the figures of Lucretia and Judith are treated with extreme delicacy, he remarks also upon the profoundly cruel aspect, and one which is made even more evident by the fact of their adjacency.

I have argued that the figures of Lucretia and Judith correspond to the cruel impasse of masculinity, its sacrificing of the feminine within and the fear of external femininity as loss of identity. But why should the adjacency of the two reinforce, for the author, the cruelty of the work, to the point where, he says, one would feel faint in front of the

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34 Leiris, L’âge d’homme, p.55.
35 Leiris, Manhood, p.25.
painting? To answer this question I need to draw together several threads, beginning with a rather disturbing moment described in which the young Leiris becomes erotically stimulated by watching his mother undress: 'J’apercevais parfois ma mère au moment où elle s’approchait pour la nuit et, autant que je le pouvais, je la regardais se déshabiller; je me rappelle qu’un soir je me suis ainsi hypocritement débauché, en observant sa poitrine découverte.' The mother is only in the next room, she seems accessible, but she is not. She belongs to the father, as Lucretia belongs to Tarquinius Collatinus. She can be secretly spied upon, but not touched with erotic intent. Is it the incest prohibition which confers upon his mother her desirability for the adolescent Michel, masturbating behind his bedroom door? Like Sextus Tarquin, he is denied access, but performs a kind of violation. The fantasy of raping the mother seems to me to underlie the author’s fascination with the figure of Lucretia, which he describes in clearly pornographic language: ‘deux seins merveilleusement durs et ronds’; ‘la virilité inexorable du violeur quand elle était entrée de force dans l’orifice béant déjà entre ses cuisses’, and so on. The entry of her own dagger reenacts the sexual violation. Leiris’s pornographic homage to the figure of Lucretia is followed shortly afterwards by a gesture of dismissal of her ridiculously servile devotion to conjugal morality, although it is her chastity precisely which attracts the attentions of Sextus Tarquin. The fantasy of the rape cannot be enjoyed without the eruption of subsequent bitterness at its impossibility of enactment, blamed upon the mother for her constancy to the father. This contemptuous resentment precedes Leiris’s

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36 Leiris, L’âge d’homme, p.65.
37 Ibid., p.142.
38 Ibid., p.143.
extended meditation upon the figure of Judith and perhaps acts as one of the bridges between the two instances of femininity.

The figures of Lucretia and Judith are strikingly similar, with seemingly identical bodies. But I would like to linger for a moment on the dissimilarities between the two. Judith’s veil and jewelry are more sumptuous than Lucretia’s, her adornments more obvious. Lucretia rather ineffectually draws the fabric of her vestments about her. Her pose is of a stricken martyr, with an expression of tragic anguish, her look is directed upwards, towards heaven. Judith looks relaxed and thoughtful, with a distant, perhaps melancholic look downwards. I see Judith as feeling pity for Holofernes, while Lucretia evokes pity for herself. Despite her virtue, Lucretia displays herself fully to the gaze, while Judith appears to be walking away from the scene of the crime, there is a sense of movement and freedom.

Cranach paints Judith and Lucretia after the act of making love with their enemies, Sextus Tarquin and Holofernes. The painting depicts the risk entered into by both sexes by a real encounter with the other. This disturbance of known quantities by sexuality is emphasised by Michèle Richman, who describes at work in Leiris’s texts an uncontrolled chavirement or unsettling of the order of things: ‘Like Proust and his faux pas, Leiris seems to stumble on to his epiphanies when least expected. His only “method” is a willingness to stray from the established path,’ she writes, ‘drawing attention to the spiritual or sacred intent in Leiris, the subtly subversive use of language to move away from the known, the domesticated. The effort of the autobiographer is always towards this

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40 Ibid., p.95.
heightened experience, the intense awareness of reality which accompanies a terrified fascination: as Richman points out, Leiris's voyage to Africa or his writing of an autobiography according to the rules of bullfighting result from a desire for vulnerable exposures which allow a rupture with a self-satisfied milieu. A continuity is recognisable here with Sacher-Masoch in both of the novels I have looked at, in which the tedium of a moneyed, unchallenging existence is reversed by a foray into an underworld of class and race. Psychoanalysis, despite enabling Leiris's fabrication of a personal mythology, is, thinks Richman, at odds with his own goals. Leiris's writing is most rewarding because, while in parallel to psychoanalysis in capturing and expressing unusual and exotic acts, thoughts and experiences, it does not define nor clinically qualify the passing qualities, nuances and moods on which it picks up. Leiris's fascination with the deadly is also incompatible with a therapeutic perspective. For Leiris, as for Weil and Unamuno, death is not just the end, nor even a return to the inanimate - it is an underlying presence which, given a certain insight, can be felt, grasped, not at a conscious level, but through the disturbance of the order of things, through erotic excess, through diversions, inversions, excursions from the self.

One order that is disrupted is what the author calls 'l'ordre féroce de la virilité'. It is an order challenged from within and from outside, from inadmissible identifications with the mother and equally repressed and violent incestuous desires. The invisible figure of the father enforces the law of exile of sons from mothers. Holofernes' head, severed from its body, and upon which Leiris does not comment, is not that of a repulsive monster, but that of a handsome, rather ascetic man. His expression is one of anguished abandonment. But

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41 Leiris, L'âge d'homme, p. 42.
Holofernes is dead. If with Lucretia we saw woman as victim, with Judith it is the male who is put to death. Clearly the painting articulates Leiris’s recurrent theme of the wounded man. Chapters such as ‘Gorge coupée’, ‘Sexe enflammé’, and ‘Pied blessé, fesse mordue, tête ouverte’ describe various childhood accidents or illnesses. They follow directly after the chapter on Holofernes’ head and unmistakably identify the narrator with the wounded man. The memories of being wounded are given an importance here which such minor incidents hardly seem to deserve. It is their aggregation which gathers significance around, for example, an operation in which the six year old Michel’s tonsils are removed, or a minor inflammation of the penis. It is not the events in themselves that Leiris is concerned with, but their capacity to articulate his psyche, how they have marked his sense of the outside world. He writes of the tonsillectomy that: ‘Toute ma représentation en est resté marquée: le monde, plein de chausse-trapes, n’est qu’une vaste prison ou salle de chirurgie; je ne suis sur terre que pour devenir chair à médecins, chair à canons...’42 The world is, for Leiris, a place full of traps, where every pleasure is to be revealed as a means to harm him. What we are being led towards is his sexual complex, the crucial chapter on Lucretia and Judith which reveals a similar perspective. Leiris sees himself as bound in advance for victimhood: already wounded (in extremely minor ways) during childhood, he wants nothing better than to consciously assume the same position as adult male. For Leiris, Judith eclipses Lucretia, and if it is hard in life to find anyone who can fulfill the role, that does not prevent him from trying, via ‘l’attitude écrasée’43 that he adopts.

42 Ibid., p.105
43 Ibid., p.144.
What follows is another inventory, like the list of childhood accidents. Many of the women he has never spoken to: Sarah Bernhardt and other inaccessible actresses, for example, or a young widow with bottle-blonde hair. These Judths are equivalent to others, whores or mistresses, for whom the narrator’s fascination has a deadly edge - an American woman who spoke of having committed a murder, a woman who showed a knife scar on her thigh. The list ends with a category of Judths who are simply women with whom he dare not exchange a word, who render him speechless. Many of the women listed are cruel: others have cruelty thrust upon them. He seems to extract a wry pleasure from the confessions of being bitten, kicked in the face, of falling into impotence, being ridiculed and humiliated by these Judths. The latter form a category of women ‘qui m’attirent dans la mesure où elles m’échappent ou bien me paralysent et me font peur’. They inspire in him a holy terror.

Jacqueline Lichtenstein, in an essay called ‘Making up representation’ offers a clue to the terror inspired by the figure of Judith. For her, Judith is an allegory of make-up, the beauties of colouring, indeed, an allegory of painting itself, in its essence and its effects. The painted woman, nude on canvas or lipstick on flesh and blood woman, exerts a specific effect, which is to ruin all articulation. Make-up, she says, gives itself over to the gaze in the dissolution of speech. Judith outwits death by her trickery and artifice. To that extent she is an exemplary emblem for the project of Leiris himself, on the one hand pleading pathetically for sympathy from the reader, on the other serving up a heady cocktail of exhibitionism, autoeroticism, incest, sadism and masochism, and getting away

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44 Ibid., p.142.
45 Lichtenstein, ‘Making up representation’.
with it by making it art. With Judith, the author passes from an unhappy, tortured identification with a woman to a powerful one. This parallels an episode in the autobiography where he meets the first love of his life, Kay. He has not yet become her lover, and the two of them, with another couple, decide to dress up. Kay dresses as a man. Michel puts on a dress and she helps him to put on make-up. Leiris writes: ‘Toute difficulté était pour moi levée, vue que, grâce à mon travestissement, je n’avais qu’à me laisser faire.’ Kay feminises his name to Micheline, the name his mother would have called him if he had been born a girl.

The portrait of Lucretia, the murder or suicide of maternal identification, could be seen as the first part of a struggle which works out differently in the portrait of Judith: in this case, femininity wins, killing the secondary construction of masculinity. All that Michel has to do is put on make-up and women’s clothes to let himself go. Only by renouncing his manhood, becoming Micheline, can he become Kay’s lover, thereby in reality assuming it. It is as if their exchange of clothing - Kay borrows his hat, cane and suit - opens up a possibility for another kind of exchange: a dialogue between the sexes. Lichtenstein cites Jesuit works on rhetoric from the period of the Counter-Reformation in which Judith was seen as an ascetic adapting herself to the role of courtesan to trick and destroy her adversary. Judith was a symbol of eloquence, in particular the triumphant eloquence of the church. In such discourses, Judith is invested with a potential for speech which is used in a similar way to her feminine artifices: to destroy, outwit, overwhelm, ruin the speech of the other. This view of Judith links her to the figure of Dragomira in Sacher-Masoch’s Die Seelenfängerin: another woman who is a religious zealot, yet who dresses exquisitely as a

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46 Leiris, L’âge d’homme, p.174.
femme du monde, to capture Count Soltyk for her prey. The image of the woman in both novels has a tremendous power, hypnotising the male. Beyond this, there is the question of the surface - evidently make-up, clothing, is superficial, can be put on. What is underneath?

That is one of the questions haunting the masochistic male. If L’âge d’homme is an autobiography, one of Leiris’s aims is to unveil his own psyche, to go below the surface. Yet here is a problem, which emerges in the text immediately after the list of Judiths. Writing of his childhood, he is unable to locate an authentic centre for himself: ‘Il me serait à peu près impossible de dire à quels moments, même très jeune, j’étais vraiment naturel, à quels moments j’incarnais un personnage, non pas, en vérité, dans un but concerté d’hypocrisie (car, bien souvent, j’étais ma première dupe) mais par besoin instinctif de me grandir aux yeux des autres ou à mes propres yeux.’ If it is hard for the adult Leiris to determine when, as a child, he was being true to himself, when playing a part in order to impress others, this tendency is one that in this autobiography he will resist. Going wholly the other way, the persona presented here is fearful, cowardly, inadequate. Are we to take this version as the real Leiris, or is the adult autobiographer merely a more sophisticated manipulator of his own self-presentation? This is a hall of mirrors for both reader and narrator, the latter fully aware of his capacity for self-suggestion. If the name of the game is trickery and artifice, dressing-up and dressing-down, cross-dressing, but never undressing, Leiris, like Judith, does retain a sense of his ultimate goal. Like Judith, he is in deadly earnest. Is it a problem of language?

47 Ibid. p.149.
Psychoanalyst J.-B. Pontalis praises Leiris for not going the way of most autobiographers, who believe that they are what they write. Pontalis sees Leiris as his own ethnographer, discovering himself through a tracing of personal mythology. The writer privileges language as a means to revelation, yet it always lets him down, says Pontalis: or, worse still, paralyses, petrifies, terrifies him. Language, then, is another Judith: promising everything, but delivering death. Pontalis’s sharpest insight is into what it is that Leiris wants from the death that confronts him through women, through writing: the impossible-to-realise wish to be dead and to see himself dead. In this view, the writer’s consciousness reaches out to glimpse its own mortality: yet the more it rips away its own masks, the more it explodes the myth of an authentic language and actually performs a vivifying task: ‘en même temps... son aveu délivre du malaise de l’existence confuse: les masques même arrachés, la fabulation même dénoncée, conjure l’angoisse de n’être rien.’ He sees Leiris’s strategies in L’âge d’homme as attempting to outwit death by playing or being dead at the subjective level of the writing, as suffering, exorcising and taming death - death as the negation of all particularity, a pure limit against which the subject must be tested. And, says Pontalis, there is no other way of conquering death than that of realising it. This complex is, I would argue, a central one in masochism: the various humiliations and tribulations the masochist suffers are used to build an imaginary, self-willed death, a death grasped at the most heightened moment of life experience, the self-shattering sexual act. Pontalis sees in L’âge d’homme a live text in which the work of

48 ‘À l’inverse des littérateurs qui, dans un mélange puéril d’exaltation et de mauvaise foi, se croit ce qu’ils écrivent, Leiris alors même qu’il rapporte les rêves qu’il entretient sur sa personne, en désarme les pièges.’ Pontalis, Après Freud, p.320.
49 Ibid., pp.329-30.
speech merges with literature. He sees Leiris's project as an attempt to introduce into his writing a lost, opaque language, always on the point of disintegration. Madness, says Pontalis, begins when communication is no longer possible or desired, because what creates meaning is simply there, as though it were frozen and no longer referred to anything but itself. To this absolute respect for the signifier he contrasts Leiris's text, which he considers bound to life by a word to word connection.

The Judith/Lucretia diptych displays the dualities and affinities which run through the text. For Lucretia, death is the future which must be faced. Judith has already tested herself against that pure limit. But just as Lucretia can become Judith, Judith will also turn back into Lucretia. In this way, L'âge d'homme is a book of transformations. The transformation begins with a process outside the text, because it is speech, not writing: the dialogue. The aims that are, for the author, the only justifications for literature are to bring to light certain things for oneself and, at the same time, render them communicable to others. The poetics of linguistic perversions, deviations and double-entendres that Michèle Richman describes, where language is a crucial moment of the sacred, constitute a literature not sufficient to itself, one that even desperately wishes to appeal to the other, perhaps particularly to a woman, after all.

The author of L'âge d'homme confesses to having a mania for confession, above all to women, due to his timidity. Alone with a woman, his feeling of isolation and misery become unbearable, and he is incapable of finding anything to say which would support the conversation, nor to court her if he desires her. As his garrulity grows, the tension mounts and he feels more and more anguished, speaks only of himself and in particular of
his troubles, his feelings of solitude and separation from the outside world: and ends by not knowing if he is really speaking of his own life but simply expressing his momentary anguish at being alone with her. This difficulty in finding a relation to a woman is profound in L’âge d’homme, perhaps most strikingly drawn in a passage where the narrator, walking along the cliffs near Le Havre, looks out to sea, hearing the bell of a buoy which is fastened there. The melancholy sound of the bell he associates with the voice of a prostitute with whom he has spoken on the previous evening, and for whom he feels pity. At the same time, on the beach, a mother walks with her two young sons, one of whom, with a minerologist’s hammer, is collecting rock samples. Leiris writes: ‘Je m’identifiai à lui, attaché que je suis... à des travaux scientifiques que je juge mesquin, tandis qu’au coeur du monde... il y a quelque chose de si brûlant, qui délie, qui crie tout seul, demandant simplement qu’on l’entende et qu’on ait assez de courage pour s’y dévouer tout entier.’ In this passage emerge the two facets of Leiris as autobiographer: on the one side, the anthropologist carefully reconstructing the fragments of memory and dream into a personal mythology while the other, deeper self is tugged by powerful, erotic, dangerous currents, is the Leiris whose childhood weeping has become an anguished confession. It is a failed communication in which he feels humiliated, but a successful one in that a link is forged, after all, perhaps through his incapacity to attain a normal form of speech, through the exposure of his vulnerability. Leiris’s language is one of breakdown, trauma, articulation of the sacrificial entry into manhood.

Leiris’s L’âge d’homme displays the masochistic imagination at work through its characteristic strategy of having it both ways: he delights in the use of mythology, and

50 Leiris, L’âge d’homme, p.128.
relies on it to articulate important points of personal insight and psychic truth, yet his manner of handling myth reduces its dignity, and in Leiris we are never far from the infantile. Masochistically aware of his own limitations, he has the courage to entertain shattering, excessive desires, to recognise clearly where he is least comfortable, and, with a Severin-like conscientiousness, to expose himself to an unpredicted, uncontrollable exteriority, embodied by the dominatrix. The quality of dissimulation, the anti-heroism of masochism belies an integrity, a live core or human vulnerability, where Leiris cannot close himself from the other. In spite of the extremely mobile, flexible, manoeuvring intelligence everywhere at work, the body is left somehow exposed, even if the dream he reports is of a body defended by ugly, formal clothing. This masochistic body cannot enjoy a simple, narcissistic pleasure: it can only come into its own in women’s clothing: yet through it is access to a sharp, immediate, sacred reality which cuts through identity in a transient moment of sexual undoing.
I want to begin this chapter on Marguerite Duras by looking at a short novella which contains her most explicit and transgressive sadomasochistic references. Throughout the chapter I shall identify what the features of a feminine literary masochism are in Duras’ work, how they develop and in some ways move ambitiously beyond the masculine corpus I have already looked at. In that under patriarchal gender relations, women are disempowered, there can be no question here of a masochism which acts as a salutary counterpoint to a too-gratified, tediously unchallenged existence. Women are already placed in the suffering position, and women’s masochism takes a different tack, both dramatising the indecency of women’s subjection and simultaneously eroticising it. What is at stake here is a certain force, a muscul arity in the work in which the reader cannot help but be engaged. The experience is high-powered, even when Duras is at her most minimal: this reading does not rely on an implied readerly collusion, but on its own capacity to handle and manipulate identifications, and to masochistically seduce the reader who is, always, a stranger.

An encounter with a stranger reported at the beginning of one of Duras’ novels, L’amant, stages a kind of ideal seduction of a male reader by the woman writer. This man approached her to tell her that he found her face more beautiful now than when she was a young girl: ‘J’aimais moins votre visage de jeune femme que celui que vous avez maintenant, dévasté.’¹ A banal image of feminine beauty - the fresh, unmarked girl - is contrasted with the ravaged beauty of the older woman. The texts I will look

¹ Duras, L’amant, p.9.
at in this chapter present the ravaged face of femininity in a literature which marks its distance from a flawless, empty virtuosity, insisting on and exploiting tensions at multiple levels to move towards a shattering moment.

Devastation can be exquisite and horror can be sublime: Duras takes such romantic truisms and squeezes them until the pips squeak. In *L'homme assis dans le couloir*, an extraordinarily controlled and precise use of language describes a violent encounter between a man and a woman. The face of Duras' literary work, like her own under the stranger’s gaze, engages an experience of pain. Within the orchestrated holding power of Duras' literary strategies takes place a *chavirement*, in the sense that Michèle Richman uses it\(^2\) - a disruption of the ordinary state of being which allows an accession to another, sacred order.

A man and a woman enact a series of mutually invasive sexual acts including fellatio, urination, anal/oral sex. Their only words to one another are those of love and their separate desires for her death. The woman requests that he kill her by hitting her repeatedly, and the piece ends leaving us unsure whether or not she has actually died. While explicitly sexual, this is literary, rather than pornographic material.\(^3\) It is not a compliantly enacted scenario which presupposes the simultaneous disavowal and vicarious identification of an omnipotent male reader, but a distinctive story which discomfits to the point of disequilibrium, though it also contains an erotic charge. Again like Leiris, it is a literature of risk and transgression, though where the latter redeems the starkness of a vision through self-deprecatory humour, Duras intensifies the starkness of her vision through the atmosphere of restraint and the aesthetic minimalism she brings to the work.

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\(^3\) For a summary of the debate on this, see Hill, *Marguerite Duras*, pp.62-63.
The work challenges assumptions of female passivity. Her female protagonist is as sexually active as the male. The encounter is described as if from afar: when the woman takes her lover's penis into her mouth, the narrator reports: 'Je vois cela: que ce que d'ordinaire on a dans l'esprit elle l'a dans la bouche en cette chose grossière et brutale.' It is interesting here that the penis is described so negatively, as if it were the organ itself that were the seat of the man’s brutality, his sadism, not some psychological trait but the inescapable attribute of his masculinity; as if to be male simply predetermined a grossness which, however, the woman nourishes herself upon. The man's penis is also described as 'le crime'. Duras almost never names the sexual parts as such, a strategy which reduces the pornographic possibilities of the text, while finding other appellations or means of description which challenge the familiarity of the sexual organs. The crime referred to here is, we could speculate, that of a continual will to invade, to impose, to destroy. A penis, then, is no longer just an organ for reproduction, in the medical sense, or a proud badge of maleness, or a means to erotic pleasure, but embodies a propensity - and power - to harm, one in which the woman finds pleasure. The woman's sexuality, too, is repulsively powerful. When she displays herself with her legs apart in front of her lover, the text insists on her ugliness: 'Dès lors elle reste dans cette pose obscène, bestiale. Elle est devenue laide, elle est devenue ce que laide elle aurait été. Elle est laide. Elle se tient là, aujourd’hui, dans la laideur.'

From the story of this encounter, an enormous amount of information, a large number of elements that could be present have been excluded. There are neither names nor physical descriptions, the scene is unsituated historically or geographically,

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4 Duras, L’homme assis, p.27.
5 Ibid., p.12.
the man and the woman have no characteristics (the only exception to this is the indication that the woman has green eyes). There is the corridor, in which the man sits, watching the woman who lies exposed to the sun on a stony path inside a garden. Beyond the garden is a plain, a river, possibly the sea. The physical elements of the setting - sun and shade, stony ground - constitute the few props that Duras relies on, throwing all the weight of the reading fully upon the sexual engagement of the man and woman. This is a kind of hyper-reality of bare spaces without individuality in which a particular set of gestures will be enacted in a specific order, this way and no other.

The man, protected by the shade, sits in the corridor. At some metres distance, the woman lies on the stones under the blaze of the sun. The man will have to move out from his covered place, but he will retire again to it: the woman will move into his shade momentarily, only to re-emerge to the outside. The two genders occupy the spaces allocated to them as if they could not do otherwise, as if to bum in the sun was the woman’s property, to watch from the shade the man’s. It is as if she is on a stage, as if the whole thing has been set up. Yet we are never told that. But there is nothing innocent about this encounter, which the two figures carefully choreograph between them, each taking their turn patiently as the other invades their body, each enduring the violation until it is no longer possible to do so. The game is about borders, about how far each can go in transgressing the other’s boundaries. So, for example, when the man presses his foot on the woman’s chest, he will exert further and further pressure, while she remains silently attentive, until the point when she emits a cry: and he removes the foot. There is a mutual lending, so that, while the woman, later on, violently takes her pleasure in him, the man is described as giving himself to her desire as much as possible, although he cannot help crying, in ‘une plainte d’intolérable
The agreement between them is unspoken, yet present alongside their mutual will to sexual invasion. The man pushes the woman’s body around on the stony ground with his foot, with a brutality, the narrator remarks, that he can hardly contain. However, he stops at certain moments, to calm himself, then begins again. This is not about an outburst of sadistic aggression, but about the work of love, which recognises the other at the moment when most wishing to crush her. The woman who takes up the masochistic position does so by a kind of contract, and is exerting an invisible influence upon the man even while she allows her body to be cruelly treated.

It is not love, of course, as we generally see it represented. I would like briefly to look at the moments in the text where words of love are spoken. One of these moments is at a point when the woman has left her position upon the stony path and is leaning upon the frame of the door to the corridor, looking at the man, whose penis is coming out of his trousers. It is as if his essence is revealed in the exposure of his sexual organ, described as ‘grosière et brutale de même que son coeur’. It is something about which he has no choice, something centrally determining his being: ‘Forme des premiers âges, indifférenciée des pierres, des lichens, immémoriale, planté dans l’homme autour de quoi il se débat. Autour de quoi il est au bord des larmes et crie.’ In that the man sits while the woman stands leaning against the doorframe, looking down at him, in that he has been revealed in a kind of primaeval masculine essence, and in his desire for the woman, the man is put in a position of vulnerability. It is at this point that the woman speaks to him, telling him that she loves him. The
moment that the man chooses to tell the woman that he loves her also takes place at a point where she is vulnerable. The man, who has been rolling her body around on the stones, places his foot on her chest and begins to press. Although he is looking towards the river, it is without attending to what he sees. At this point he utters his declaration of love.

Though the language, setting and formal strategies employed lend the piece a sublime mood, the roles of the man and woman are close to those of children who each take turns to bully the other. It is the vulnerable one who is most childlike: the man’s cry is ‘presque enfantine’ when the woman dominates him sexually; the woman, after her cruel treatment by him, cries and calls out, then suddenly stops, as a baby might. Love is released by the vulnerability of the other, by their abjection and even their ugliness. It is what brings each of the two away from their own space: it exposes, it humiliates, continually exerting a particular force upon the lovers. The man seems to implicitly recognise this, when he tells the woman that he would like no longer to love her. He follows this up by adding that one day, he will kill her, a statement which both articulates his intense resentment of desire and also expresses the desire itself.

Possibly the woman feels similarly - the two tend to mirror each other’s actions and speech throughout - and it is soon after that she suggests that he hits her, saying that she wants to die.¹¹ No doubt this is mad love, love that verges on death.¹² We are not spared the detail of the slaps which crack against the woman’s teeth, the action of the slapping which attains ‘une vitesse machinale’. There is something demonic about it, yet at the same time something unavoidable, an essence or truth in this version of love.

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¹¹ Ibid., p.33.
¹² For more on this aspect, see Weinzaepfien, ‘Between On and Off’.
which turns its protagonists into victims, and murderers who cannot stand their victimhood.

Love is, perhaps, identifiable as the mysterious third presence in the story, the unnamed narrative voice which views the scene, which can see from each of the lovers’ positions, but can also detach itself from either, taking an active role.\textsuperscript{13} The narrating voice, with its reiterated ‘je vois’, takes up a witnessing position in relation to the two lovers. This story could not be told in the way it is by either of them, bound as each are to enact their compulsive love. The narrative voice sees and is the voice of vision, yet at the end of the story cannot tell what has happened to the woman: ‘Je l’ignore, je ne sais rien, je ne sais pas si elle dort.’\textsuperscript{14} As readers, we are made to see, to witness the encounter but not to resolve the experience through the kind of definition and loss of tension that an ending affords. This strange narrative presence within the story produces an atmosphere of mythic universality, a tragic resonance which Duras also exploits in other ways. She seems to suggest that the story is central to human experience, that it is infinite in its impersonality.

Before the lovers embark on their final, violent engagement, the narrative voice says that: ‘Rien ne se produit que le désordre et l’immobilité de leurs corps défaits excepté cette parole qu’il lui dit encore, que c’est sans fin.’\textsuperscript{15} Though it may be that the woman dies at the end of the story, nothing will have ended, because the story is not hers, or his. It belongs to them only partly, because also to the other people, the other women, the other women now dead who are implied in the same narrative.\textsuperscript{16} Which other

\textsuperscript{13} For example, Duras, \textit{L’homme assis}, pp.16-17: ‘Je lui parle et je lui dis ce que l’homme fait. Je lui dis aussi ce qu’il advient d’elle. Qu’elle voie, c’est ce que je désire.’
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p.36.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p.32.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p.35: ‘Je vois que d’autres gens regardent, d’autres femmes, que d’autres femmes maintenant mortes ont regardé de même se faire et se défaire les moussons d’été....’
people are they? It would be literalism to take it that Duras meant those who have
taken part in sadomasochistic acts or even those who have felt consumed by a burning
passion for a lover. She must mean us, the readers: there is no focus, no-one is
excluded, there is no place in which the reverberations of the story cannot be felt. The
scene is left unended: the truth that Duras seems to want us to recognise is that there is
no possibility of not desiring and no place safe from the havoc, the devastation that
desire brings with it.

So at the heart of the novella is a fatalism about each move of the actors.\textsuperscript{17} Perhaps
they are playing out a game according to their own rules, but there could be no other
game. When the woman lies in the sun, exposing herself to the man, her body runs
with perspiration. Her helplessness in front of him is genuine. They are both stuck in
the roles they enact, and Duras reinforces the impression of a fatalistic inevitability by
continual references to fixity, silence, closed eyes, the solitude of each of the partners.
Nothing could, it seems, happen differently, though there is no rationale given for this
particular script. It is not tragic, because tragedy implies catharsis, yet there is a sense
of something very ancient being re-enacted, a sombre but essential scene, as if what
were being illuminated under this clouded sky was the tangle of life and death.

If the story seems ancient, it perhaps brings us close to our subjective prehistories.
Carefully framed to be read on a mythic level, it allows the reader a possibility of the
child's 'rebroussement dans le fantasme' upon which Laplanche comments.\textsuperscript{18} The
stark, clearly defined architectural spaces in which the encounter is played out create a
dreamlike, concocted, imagined world, a pleasurably self-constructed interiority within
the larger space of consciousness. The corridor, the stony ground, represent a

\textsuperscript{17} Duras later adapted \textit{L'homme assis dans le couloir} for the theatre.

\textsuperscript{18} See chapter 1.
dimension of interiority, surrounded by the garden, the plain, and away from the sea.

The enormous vastnesses represented by the plain and the sea contrast with the distinct, controllable spaces inside the garden, the arena of the fantasy, the intrapsychic event. The event must involve intrusion and shattering, if we read the text as a privileged locus for the free-ranging movement of a desire that seeks to rupture psychic stability. The introjection is pleasurable in itself, creating a sense of an inside which is guaranteed and confirmed by the painful feelings of being invaded in that place.

If sexuality is masochistically self-shattering, it requires this psychic envelope, sensitised to penetration by an intruder. And if our psychic needs are fantasised as biological attributes, the mouth, anus and vagina are the crucial points for masochistic jouissance: all three are penetrated in L’homme assis dans le couloir. If women are considered somehow more masochistic than men under patriarchal relations, it may be that few are prepared to imagine how a man’s body may be penetrated by a woman’s. Duras’s representation of this is one of the most transgressive moments in modern literature, in my view.

This preparedness to respond to external intrusion in a sensitised psychic space seems to me central to the process of reading, making of the reader as much of a primary masochist as, in Bersani’s view, the writer has to be. To read is to masochistically build an inner potential ready to take the ruptures of erotic excess, of overstimulation. This inner space becomes gradually attuned to subtlety and nuance, where the reader’s pleasure mirrors that of the poet or novelist whose own movement of adoration towards an outside world was essential to the creation of the work.

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19 See chapter 1.
20 I take this point from Leo Bersani: see chapter 1.
This movement of literature from outside to in, the swallowing of stimuli, is in contrast with psychoanalysis’s tendency to externalise, to bring up material from the unconscious mind, thus ridding it of its symptomatic potential, transforming neuroses into ordinary, everyday unhappiness. I do not wish to deny the benefits of this talking cure, but to reinscribe the importance of an inner space in which every possible event can be imagined, including an individual death. To imagine one’s own death, in fact, is not simply another item on the shopping list, but is a need, as I have already argued. The fact that we are all ultimately incurable, that we are finite and death-bound is perhaps the deepest insight it is possible to sustain, to draw upon, to live by. This recognition can be generative of a more integrated subjectivity than the Freudian and post-Freudian models have been able to offer us.

An interiority, soul or psychic capacity for introjection of stimulus must be common to all, but literature can deepen and complexify it. Only in this dark recess of the mind can stories like *L’homme assis dans le couloir* be received. The unlovely, undesirable aspects of the self, its inarticulacy (the man and woman cry out, moan, but almost never speak), its infantile vulnerability, its ugliness and gracelessness can be comprehended within the sublime milieu that Duras creates. The reader suffers and dies with the lovers, witnesses the pathos of the scene, and, looking into the mirror of the work, sees her own ravaged face, her own devastatation.

Duras has exploited the freedom to transgress sexual and moral limits, a freedom that literature safeguards by its very existence. But the transgression is an ethical act, in that it creates new spaces for the thinkable and the imaginable, new ways for us to suffer our pathologies, to court the deadly stimuli within her pages.

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21 See chapter 2.
II. *La douleur*

In this commentary on a part of Duras’s war diary, I want to show how the masochistic imagination in feminine hands can perform surprisingly redemptive operations. Here she moves away from a mythic generality to a personal, confessional narrative which involves a journey through illness and suffering. The masochistic motif of the imitation of a dying, Christ-like male figure is exploited, for the healing of a wounded femininity: from the horror of war emerges a kernel of some compassion, and the masochistic occupation of a male position opens the door to a new feminine mimesis.

On rediscovering her wartime diary, now published under the title *La douleur*, Marguerite Duras writes that confronted with ‘un désordre phénoméenal de la pensée et du sentiment’ as she reread her own handwriting, she felt that in comparison, literature was something of which she felt ashamed.\(^\text{22}\) I take her statement on one level as an indication of the gulf between the shattering nature of extreme experience and the capacity of the intellectual and the creative faculties to represent it. The rhetorical excess of the statement is belied by the fact that, as Leslie Hill points out, the diary was revised, edited and condensed to intensify its dramatic effect.\(^\text{23}\) The figure of Robert L., based on Duras’s then husband, Robert Antelme, has been part fictionalised, and Duras uses the distinctly literary device of a move between first and third person narration. Indeed the statement itself, by emphasising the experiential level of what we are about to read, heightens our anticipation of the drama to come. And its value, far

\(^{22}\) Duras, *La douleur*, p.10.

from emphasising the spontaneity and verisimilitude of the narrative, marks out in advance the masochistic position of humility and shame from which the text is best read.

Duras boldly manipulates the reader into an identificatory position which will be reiterated in the pages of the diary, though now the imagined identification is between the narrator, Marguerite, and her husband, Robert L., who is missing in one of the concentration camps. Marguerite continually fantasises about the nature of her husband’s death: it is happening to her: she feels bursts of machine gun fire in her head; she is burned by his starvation. Unable to communicate with him, she is evacuated from herself. Unable to bear being herself, she cannot move, work, eat or sleep. Cut off from him, she moves towards him in the only way she can, which is by becoming the dying man she believes him to be. She pours her energy into vicariously experiencing his suffering, dying with him, holding his death in her own body: ‘Il ne faut pas trop de mouvements, c’est de l’énergie perdue, garder toutes ses forces pour le supplice.’ She falls apart physically, is continually ill with fever, becomes a horrifying figure who is reproached by her lover, D., for her extreme self-neglect.

Her deathly appearance corresponds to a process by which Marguerite moves out of life into a deadly existence whose extremity matches the one she imagines her husband to be suffering: ‘Je n’ai de place nulle part ici, je ne suis pas ici, mais là-bas avec lui, dans cette zone inaccessible aux autres, inconnaissable aux autres, là où ça brûle et où on tue.’ The process is an erotic one, because what Marguerite desires is the death of Robert, to own the same death, to die in the same way as he may be dying. She cannot wait to shut herself up in her flat alone, so that she can join Robert in the black ditch in

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25 Ibid., p.58.
which she sees him dying. As he dies, her own life ebbs away. Her body takes on similarities to his dying body, Duras insisting on a physical link which continues even when all other connection has been severed. This life in the body is a life beyond language, beyond the capacity of binding; is this compulsive imitation of the dying man anything to do with love?

Not in any ordinary sense. Marguerite goes on not only to ask Robert for a divorce, but to tell him that even if her lover, D., had not existed, she would never agree to live with him again. It is not a share of Robert’s life that interests the narrator, but a share of his death. Marguerite is in love with the idea of Robert L.’s death; this is an eroticisation of an imagined death. The narrator compulsively lingers over descriptions of the corpse of Robert L., a body open to the elements, passionately dwelt on in its wasted exposure: ‘Depuis quinze nuits, depuis quinze jours, à l’abandon dans un fossé. La plante des pieds à l’air. Sur lui la pluie, le soleil, la poussière des armées victorieuses. Ses mains sont ouvertes.’

She sees him swarmed over by vermin, wonders whether the bullet which killed him entered him in the heart, between the eyes, in the back of the neck. She is absorbed into the aberrant details of a violence directed at this particular body, Robert L.’s and through mimesis, her own.

Is this a description of an overwrought and desperate woman who, trapped in a purgatory of waiting, longs to know whether her husband is alive or dead? Or is it a compulsive battering against the doors of a truth, an obsessive tracing of the unacknowledged atrocities, the unofficial, nameless devastations that cannot be comprehended only within the context of the war? La douleur’s project, in this sense, is analogous to the unofficial status of Marguerite’s tracing agency, one which gleaned

26 Ibid., p.17.
details of the whereabouts and condition of missing persons, while the Gaullists are merely interested in publishing genocide horror stories. The violence at the heart of *La douleur* is mobile, unpredictable, shattering, fascinating, generalised yet personal. An internalisation or embracing of the evil is what, on an ethical level, the narrator suggests: ‘La seule réponse à faire à ce crime est d’en faire un crime de tous. De le partager.’[27] And Marguerite seems to be operating on this principle in her physical occupation of the world. Like Robert, dead in a ditch, she is dirty. She has stopped washing. Her illness, bodily vulnerability and continual anxiety link her also to the STO volunteers whose hands are grimy with the oil of machinery, working-class women who voluntarily worked in Germany. The narrator’s sympathies are evidently with these powerless people and against the exquisitely dressed, aristocratic Gaullists who control their fate. In *La douleur*, people are recognised and acknowledged in their bodily weakness, while those in health and in power are grotesque bullies. To be clean and sane are the worst of sins: the narrator describes herself as cowardly: ‘Je n’ai jamais rencontré une femme plus lâche que moi.’[28] and reports D. as calling her ‘une malade’, ‘une folle’. Like the volunteers, she is dispossessed, in her case of her health, looks, mental balance; in a particularly arresting image, her head is described as ‘un abcès’.[29] Throughout *La douleur* there is a reiteration of an opposition between something unavoidable and grossly, incontinently physical, which engages the body through pain, desire, hunger, and abstract, intellectual categories and knowledge systems. An example of this is Duras’s reporting of De Gaulle’s avoidance of any mention of the concentration camps, of the Reverend Father Panice of Notre Dame’s

[27] Ibid., p.61.
[28] Ibid., p.30.
[29] Ibid., p.36.
speech against revolution in favour of order and a work ethic. Church and State
strategically operate to secure their institutional interests, are fundamentally
untrustworthy. The chaos of bodily suffering around Marguerite is the only thing she
will credit. Thought is helplessly flawed, incapable of registering and responding to
the living hell of the war, while the body is inescapably implicated, marking the events
with cries, blood, tears. The consistent imagery of people being destroyed, brutalised,
of personal loss, is counterposed with new reports of the Allies’ triumphs, the
occupation of Germany, the destruction of Berlin. The news is reported blankly,
without comment. But when a phone call to D. reveals that Robert L. is alive,
Marguerite falls on the floor, the news producing a kind of gushing from every orifice:
‘Ça crève, ça sort par la bouche, par le nez, par les yeux. Il faut que ça sorte...Ça sort
en eau de partout...Ça sort de toutes les façons que ça vient. Ça sort.’ Knowledge is
graped through the bodily organs, produces this instantaneous organic eruption of
disorganised sound, of primordial crying, collapse, bursting. Real knowledge implicates
the corporeal material of the self, cannot be sealed off in idealisation, punctures the
march forward of the ideal (represented here by the elegant Gaullists, the government
officials, the advancing Allied forces) by its breaking of boundaries, its unpredictable
implosions and overflows, its grotesque appearance.

On his arrival in the narrative, Robert L. in effect takes over the role of Marguerite
in signifying all that the official representations of the war omit. He is unrecognisable,
identified by his friends only by his teeth. When Marguerite sees him for the first time
on his return, she runs away screaming. Visited by the doctor, he is hardly registered as

30 Cf. Duras, La douleur: ‘Ce n’est que souffrances partout, saignements et cris, c’est pourquoi la
pensée est empêchée de se faire, elle ne participe pas au chaos mais elle est constamment supplantée
par ce chaos, sans moyens, face à lui.’ p.45.
31 Ibid., p.48.
human, just a form lying on a divan. Duras makes an inventory of Robert L.’s appearance. The emaciated neck that can be circled by one hand, the missing fingernails, the skin like cigarette paper, the visible carotid arteries. Robert L. is a living skeleton, a symbol of death. What has been brought back from the dead is another kind of body, not the vital one, but the body hidden inside it which will reclaim it at death. What is unrecognisable is the transformation of a living body into a dying one. The estrangement that this produces is an essential, fundamental one. Here we are reminded of Duras’s opening remark, where she appears to postulate the primacy of experience over all representation of it: the indecency of a literature for itself, or one which through literary devices seeks to renew our relation to the world, such as certain kinds of formalism. It is the presence of death which is strange, a presence which, at the centre of the diary piece, in the shape of Robert L., creates a disturbance all around it. Her remark could be read as implying that if literature is to be worth anything, it must respond to the challenge of the deadly. Her own response, here, is essentially to eroticise the specific dying, struggling, mutilated form of Robert L., to narcissistically eroticise her own identificatory suffering, to masochistically construct a lover’s discourse upon the horrifying details of Robert’s wretched state. The tracing of the stages of Robert’s recovery forces the reader to face the bedrock states of human experience - debilitation, fever, hunger, processes which are anything but poetic. Duras’s iconoclastic method produces a stark, stony textual surface, nevertheless marked by compulsive repetitions and reiterations of images of woundedness and brutalisation. This masochistic writing embraces an aesthetics of negativity rather than an absence of the aesthetic.
When the body suffers, one lives in it, cannot help but recognise it. In the harrowing process of waiting for Robert L., time is lived in the present moment. Under the aberrant conditions of war, utopian possibilities for living are exposed, albeit seen through a negative lens. Another kind of language is signaled in Marguerite’s incoherent screams: a fantasy of a language which directly speaks through the body. Utopian possibilities include the end of hatred as a consolation: ‘Maintenant contre l’amour que j’ai pour lui et la haine que je leur porte, je ne sais plus distinguer.’\(^{32}\) The priest who adopts a German orphan is a stranger to the hatred the child inspires. This consolidating, uncompromising hatred is a generality which contrasts with the individuality of Robert L., only revealed at his deathbed.\(^{33}\) Only at the moment that Robert hangs by a thread to life, is his solitude, his individuality perceptible.

Conventional morality is alien to the irreducible knowledge that suffering imparts. De Gaulle, for example, is considered to be reluctant to admit the suffering that working people went through and its importance for the Allied victory. Such morality is in sharp contrast to the passionate commitment of Marguerite, of D., of the doctor, who go to work to save Robert’s life.

For the narrator, the experience of helping to save her husband is also a healing process. She had previously lost other loved ones and in doing so lost her own pain: ‘J’avais perdu aussi la douleur, elle était pour ainsi dire sans objet, elle se bâtissait sur le passé. Ici l’espoir est entier, la douleur est implantée dans l’espoir...’\(^{34}\) She has the opportunity to rediscover a pain implanted in hope, rather than one lost, without focus, without access. The metaphor for this recharging of life and reintegration of sensation

\(^{32}\) Ibid., p.35.

\(^{33}\) Cf. Duras, *La douleur*: ‘Que c’était là, pendant son agonie que j’avais le mieux connu cet homme, Robert L., que j’avais perçu pour toujours ce qui le faisait lui, et lui seul...’ p.80.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., p.74.
appears at the moment close to the end of the narration, when Marguerite lets go of the idea of Robert’s death, while on holiday with him and a group of others. A new friend, Ginette, and Marguerite press lemon juice into their mouths and the juice enables them to feel the depth and strength of their hunger. Ginette points out that the lemons are just as juicy as oranges, ‘mais ils ont le goût sévère.’ Having vicariously experienced death, and vicariously survived it, the narrator has been sharpened and revived. One of the things this indicates is the possibility that a masochistic process may be finite, bounded by particular psychic necessities, a rite of passage.

Marguerite’s journey into the Underworld, her *imitatio Christi* is an unusually striking confrontation of the imagination with death. We have seen how in Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs*, the masochistic ritual evolved between Severin and Wanda leads to a rite of passage through which the former attains masculine identity, how in Leiris’s *L’âge d’homme* masochistic acts allow a discharge into language and sexual *jouissance*. The masochistic impulse, it can be argued, may be a response to a variety of psychic needs, temporary or permanent. At the end of the diary in *La douleur* we see a Marguerite who swims, runs and sunbathes with a woman friend, who responds to the natural environment, the mountains, the groves of fig trees, the sand and the wind, a woman who calmly and simply inhabits her body. Her madness and illness while waiting for Robert has now been displaced by a quite other way of being.

Mapped onto this diaristic document are the ebb and flow of the narrator’s erotic and emotional investments. A key element, that is identifiable, is a paranoia about loss of identity: almost a reversal of the narrator’s difficulties in *L’âge d’homme*, for instead of claustrophobic self-enclosure, here it is a question of an obliteration in loss,

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35 Ibid., p.78.
of the incapacity to sense, feel, contain and hold onto pain. In her recurrent image of Robert’s death, the first thing to go is his way of looking: ‘Comme il regarde, comme il fait pour voir, c’était ce qui mourait en premier dans l’image allemande de sa mort lorsque je l’attendais à Paris.’ His individuality, his particular perspective, is the thing she fears most to lose in Robert and by implication in herself. But Robert not only survives, but faces his own death without losing his mind, still able to talk, recognise, respond, demand. His recovery is accompanied by hers; she begins to eat and sleep, begins to put on weight. At this very point, when Robert’s recovery is on track and Marguerite is also beginning to thrive, she writes: ‘Mon identité s’est déplacée. Je suis celle qui a peur quand elle se réveille. Celle qui veut à sa place, pour lui.’ The fear of a loss of self has been faced, in the willed projection into the fate of Robert L. Now, it can be flatly stated, as gradually Robert and the narrator begin to turn back towards life.

Marguerite’s masochism has the quality of a willed madness which restores her and brings her back from the dead. At the end of the piece, her friend Ginette says that she wishes she had known her when she was waiting for Robert. One implication here is that the person Marguerite was at that time was out of the ordinary, that, like Robert, she also was revealed in her solitude and essence. The statement reminds the reader of the position she has enjoyed, as witness of the excessive moment of the narrator’s waiting and of the integrity not preserved but discovered then. A particular knowledge has been exposed.

How is the reader addressed by this? This is, as the reviewers say, compulsive reading. Duras does nothing to charm, please, amuse or compromise with her readers.

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36 Ibid., p.77.
37 Ibid., p.74.
One is taken forcibly and carried into the thick of the narrator's world through the intensity and vigour of the writing. The tight, controlled use of language and the striking, highly dramatised images create a pressurised environment without reflective spaces. It is a hard drive through difficult terrain, and at certain points Duras could be accused of exploiting her material for its shock value. From the start, as I have said, the reader is placed in a masochistic relation to the text, face up against the grim realities of Marguerite's version of the war. The account is a high-tension one, which forces us down into the black ditch of an imagined death. The erotic, shattering potential of the events described cannot but affect us. Marguerite Duras the writer (rather than Marguerite the narrator) has taken the place of the torturing woman occupied by Wanda in Venus in Furs.

But this time it is on her own terms. The woman in question is no longer merely a midwife or facilitator of a male rite of passage. She is no longer an icon of late Romanticism or the symbol of problematic masculine gender formation. Indeed, Duras turns the tables on such appropriations of femininity by male writers: Robert L., as an erotically charged icon of maimed masculinity replies to late nineteenth century necrophiliac images of women; as I have shown, the journey into hell of the narrator is a rite of passage leading to a renewed sense of self. The identification with Robert is also a cutting across gender boundaries, in a sense analogous to the cross-dressing between Kay and Michel in L'âge d'homme; in La douleur the import of this is buried under the burning question of Robert's life or death. But by projecting herself into his death, she is also taking on his masculinity. In La douleur, Marguerite does not occupy a feminine body until the end, when swimming and talking with Ginette. The symptoms
of Robert's illness and hunger that she manifests emphasise the continuity between the male and the female body.

To extend the comparison between Leiris's autobiography and Duras's diary slightly further, if Leiris needs to masochistically identify with the figure of Judith in order to breach an over-defended, walled-in masculine psychic construction, then Marguerite equally needs to project herself into the form of a vulnerable, dying, Christ-like Robert to serve her own needs. If La douleur is about refinding identity, this refinding is of a specifically feminine self. The odd echo behind the processes of waiting for and then nurturing the slight, broken figure of Robert are of gestation and delivery. Robert is as helpless as a baby, even has to be fed on gruel which is normally given to babies. The baby that Marguerite has lost, the one she hopes to have with D. are both present in Robert. Indeed, D. and Marguerite care for him like a pair of anxious parents, and after his arrival in Paris, the emphasis on her singularity is replaced by the first person plural pronoun, the nous. Identification with a vulnerable male figure who is infantilised and nurtured allows a protective, maternal power to reinvigorate the narrator, to realise a self-confident, integrated feminine position. The presence of Ginette at the end of the piece is evidence of a new kind of feminine mimesis which now replaces the link with Robert L.

With La douleur, masochistic literature moves into a different space, its symbols, images and concerns now made to perform under the direction of a forceful female will. The exploitation of fantasy images of war and mutilation are brought home to a feminine body which orchestrates a general malaise in its morbid symptoms. A macerated, imploded interiority absorbs the war and gives it out again, reproducing it as the image of Our Lady of the Sorrows, the grieving mother of a Christ who is dying.
But in a double redemption, in this triumph of the maternal, the mutilated body is brought back to life. The masochistic narrative does not have to compromise with patriarchal relations, as it does in Sacher-Masoch, or share the ground with a debilitating self-disgust, as it does in Leiris. The permeable female body that Duras foregrounds is one that accepts pain, but also pours it out, that is engulfed, ravaged, but ultimately irrepressible.
III. La maladie de la mort

Many of the masochistic motifs and preoccupations that I have already identified in Duras’s work re-appear in a third text that I will now examine, La maladie de la mort. But as I will explicate, they come into play as part of a far-reaching attempt to move beyond gender, to move around and re-stage the monolithic qualities deeply inscribed in consciousness, that are represented by each gender, to see what is at stake in a desire which is somehow fundamentally conceived as masculine and a corporeality occupied by the feminine. As elsewhere in Duras, the version of love is of a deadly kind of self-exposure to the omnipotent other, within a masochistic contract agreed at the outset. And as, for example, in L’homme assis dans le couloir, there is no single vantage point upon the events that take place, no single interpretation of them, indeed as I shall show, the critics of this récit are as deeply divided as the two protagonists. The reader is kept in a masochistic suspense that is never resolved. Masochism is also present here as the pleasure which perversely flourishes on the front line of the sex war, an erotic and profane rendering of the Christian injunction to love one’s enemy.

A man pays a woman to sleep with him every night for several nights, in an attempt to learn how to love. Such is the skeletal plot of La maladie de la mort, a fiction of some 50 pages in length. As in the other Duras texts I have looked at, we are up against an inscrutability which heightens our observation of minutiae. The intense significance of the minimal exchanges between the lovers is thrown sharply into relief by the removal of all contextual information. I want to look at some of the constituent elements which, drawn together, form the tissue of this text which is characterised by

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38 Duras, La maladie de la mort,
an aura of reluctance, from which it emerges and to which, with the woman’s disappearance, it returns.

First of all, what kind of woman is it that would accept such a contract? What do we know about her? She is young, very thin, and although the man does not know how to look, he supposes that she must be beautiful. There is an implication of racial difference in the reference to the woman’s female ancestors who kept silent and submitted themselves entirely,39 to the brown skin of her breasts,40 to the darkness of her body against the white sheets.41 Her body is described as weak and fragile, defenceless. She sleeps much of the time of the narrative: when awake, appears absent, without will, allowing the man complete control over her body, letting him do exactly as he pleases. She fulfils the conditions of the contract, so that when the man says she must not cry, she does not cry. She allows him to control her. Of the man, we know less, nothing of his physical appearance. What is essential is that he is the one who has proposed the contract, the aim of which is to gain knowledge of the feminine, to learn to love it.42 He is also the one who pays, a payment which secures the terms of the contract in spite of the fact that the woman is not a prostitute. (Certain feminist interpretations43 ignore this when referring to the economic dependency of the woman, the man’s monetary control; she states herself that she accepted the contract because she saw he had the maladie de la mort.) The man initiates the mutual exchange: his
money for her body and her submission. The terms of the contract set out the limitations of his capacity to know the feminine: he has already determined, at the outset, how he wants to know, perhaps in the only way possible for him. He wants to know the woman’s submissive body, that is all. On attaining jouissance, she cries out, one night, upon which the man, ‘vous’, tells her not to cry out. On her saying the words ‘Quel bonheur’, he puts his hand over her mouth to keep her quiet, telling her that ‘on ne dit pas ces choses-là’. He is the one who does not love anyone, who has never loved, incapable of even seeing the beauty of the woman. But he does gaze at her all night, he is driven towards her, during his sleepless nights, during which he is often in tears, without knowing why. Finally, the man is the one who has la maladie de la mort, according to the woman.

So far I have identified extreme differences between the contracted lovers, differences which enable each of them to supply the other with a missing element, the basis of the contract. These differences, which seem fundamental, which do not resolve themselves during the narrative, also render any possibility of the man achieving his aim slim indeed. However, there are also some similarities. One of these is that neither of them knows, both are unable to say much about themselves. The instances of not-knowing of the two lovers are too numerous to comment on, but, for example: he does not know how she sees or thinks; she does not know how a woman’s body feels to a man who penetrates it; he does not know whether the word ‘seul’ describes his state. His non-knowledge is not commensurate with hers, since he is addressed by the narrator, while her position is hidden behind his, filtered by his perception. The narrator describes their positions in this way: ‘Parce que vous ne savez rien d’elle vous

44 Duras, La maladie de la mort, p.15.
Their faculties and means to knowledge are as different and unequal as the actual knowledge to which they have access, or are deprived of.

The question of vision is complex and calls into question the position of the narrator; while the man is continually characterised as not being able to see, even though he is continually gazing at the woman, his own absence from the text as an object of vision is total. If the woman sees him in the precise sense that he cannot see her - she sees that he is 'un mort', that he is infected with la maladie de la mort - she cannot return his look, cannot see his corporeality. And since this never becomes an issue in La maladie de la mort, it becomes a blind spot for the narrator as well as for the woman.

Both these similarities - lack of vision and of knowledge - are asymmetrical. Each is like the negative of the other. Taking up the man’s position in the récit, Maurice Blanchot interprets the woman’s refusal to listen to him speak of his childhood, her restrictive interpretation of his tears, as her locking him into a masculine closure. For Blanchot the woman takes up all the available space without allowing the man any. But the woman is mirroring the man’s repression of her speech, and of the cry of her orgasm. An argument could be made against Blanchot’s position that the man is the worthier protagonist in his attempts to love, to break out of himself, to move towards a passion he can never find, in citing the woman’s acceptance of the contract, given that she is not a prostitute, as equally courageous. Her fidelity to its terms is unflinching and she even tries to help him move towards his goal. A negative

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45 Ibid., p.35.
46 Ibid., p.20.
47 Blanchot, La communauté inavouable.
48 She says: 'Essayez de voir, c’est compris dans le prix que vous avez payé.' Duras, La maladie de la mort, p.22.
mirroring of Blanchot’s remarks, from a feminine position might describe how the man deeply rejects the woman character. On finding that she is looking at him, the male character cries out. It is also possible to take issue with him over his argument that the woman refuses a maternal position. What could be more typically maternal than her reproval of his crying: ‘Ça va être la fin, n’ayez pas peur’? 49

Neither knows, neither sees, and each of the lovers represses and refuses the other, the woman notably in refusing to speak the man’s name, a refusal which seems to give her pleasure, resulting in almost the only smile of the whole récit. 50 Is this relationship between the sexes one that Duras is celebrating or ironically attacking? While feminist critics have seen the récit as an allegory of patriarchal gender relationships, male critics, from Blanchot to Hill have celebrated the failure of relationship. For Hill, the text arrives at a ‘radically catastrophic, purer affirmation of the sublime relationship of non-relationship on which Duras here confers the implicit name of love.’ 51 For Blanchot the failure of intimacy parodically protects the protagonists from fusional romantic love and opens up the possibility of a community of lovers in which each preserves their solitude while exposing himself or herself to the dispersal of death.

While feminist critics see the narrative as representing gender warfare, the men see something more positive in it. One of the strange things, then, is that the text can be read either as parodic or as utopian, descriptive or prescriptive. The gender division affecting the critical commentary reflects the absolute incapacity of the lovers to share a single perception. For example, the woman asks the man what the colour of the sea is. He replies that it is black; we know that he sees it as such, but she replies that ‘la

49 Ibid., p.25.
50 ‘Elle ne répond pas, alors vous criez encore. Et c’est alors qu’elle sourit. Et c’est alors que vous savez qu’elle est vivante.’ Ibid., p. 26.
51 Hill, Marguerite Duras, p.158.
mer n’est jamais noire," that he is mistaken. Later, in reply to his question as to whether or not he could be loved, she replies negatively, stating as one of the reasons, ‘ce mensonge de dire que la mer est noire.’ What is true for the man is a lie for the woman. Their incompatibility is absolute, and the reason given is the man’s sickness, his malady of death.

As Blanchot points out, there may be a reference to Kierkegaard’s *The Sickness unto Death*, to which I have already referred in the second chapter. For Kierkegaard, this sickness is despair, but a despair bound up with spiritual development. What is important is for the sufferer to recognise and realise their own despair, to suffer it in order to become self-aware. This negative state must be passed through to reach self-consciousness. Kierkegaard writes that: ‘even the most beautiful and lovely thing of all, a womanly youthfulness, is nevertheless despair.’ This is because the immediate good fortune to be found in it is not a spiritual category. The notion of spirituality expressed here is of a divorce from the immediate, a Christian rejection of the world - the world as represented, however flatteringly, in the form of a woman.

One thing Duras’s text can be seen to do is restage the relation between the despairing male and the beautiful woman, to propose and engage with a different set of tensions between the feminine body and masculine consciousness. The man’s malady of death, in this case, is accompanied by no good fortune where women are concerned; in respect of women, he has neither experience nor previous inclination. He seeks to move out of himself, to realise a further potential, directly through the woman’s body, not in opposition to it. And the potential he seeks is to be able to love, not a purely

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52 Duras *La maladie de la mort*, p.46.
53 Ibid., p.46.
54 Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, p.56.
spiritual goal perhaps, but one which encompasses a religious dimension. However valuable Kierkegaard’s thinking is in its privileging of the experience of suffering, it remains incapable of imagining a spirituality which would integrate the profanity of the body or even be centred precisely there. Is it possible to re-imagine corporeality as paradoxically able to reconcile pleasure and self-mortification, and does not masochism fulfil this strange reconciliation - strange, at least, from both the Christian and the secular perspectives? In this sense, the existence of masochism stands as a reproach to the impossible choice between belief and non-belief in God, wishful thinking and unenlightened self-interest; the dialectical forward movement that Kierkegaard sees in repetition here produces a coincidentia oppositorum by which flesh and spirit become identical, without referral to any ultimate authority but also without reduction to animality.

Duras’s male protagonist appears to be attempting to move away from an existence in which he alone occupies himself to one which recognises not only another person, but what is implied by that, an external world which resists him, radically limits him. It is this limitation that the woman imposes on him - merely through her existence, the separateness of her body, the impossibility of erasing every trace of her individuality - that produces the man’s perception that the sickness of death is actually in her rather than him: ‘Vous découvrez que c’est là, en elle, que se fomente la maladie de la mort, que c’est cette forme devant vous déployée qui décrète la maladie de la mort.’ 55 His perception is hard to interpret. We are never faced with the woman’s pain, but it is manifest in the fatigue which makes her sleep through the narrative. It may be that this sleep is the product of an equally deep denial of life as the man’s malady, and that her

55 Duras, La maladie de la mort, p.38.
very conviction that it is he who is ill makes her even more suspect. If she functions from his perspective as a deadly limit, that does not render her a simple representative of life from the reader’s point of view. Like the characters, we are not in a position to know.

The man’s malady is one that he becomes aware of and realises (in his distressed crying and sobbing) through the agency of the woman, so achieving a greater level of individuality, in the Kierkegaardian sense. If the woman is infected, her position is even worse than his, remaining latent. We are never aware of a process taking place for her; it is more that she lends herself to him, or indeed rents herself to him, for the stipulated period of time of their encounter. It can be argued that it is the man’s difficulties that Duras is dealing with in this story rather than the woman’s, though we may be aware of the latter in a subliminal way. It may be that masculinity and femininity are only the symbols of certain quantities or qualities hard to represent in any other way, for example the conscious and the unconscious mind. This would be a simplification, and gender does seem central to the scene of passion here, but is not the play of mutual negation between the lovers, their canceling out of each other’s explicit and implicit demands, is not their absolute incompatibility a hint of something even more fundamentally conflictual than gender hostility? It is hard to go any further, but whatever it is that each of the lovers represents seems figured by their relative positions in the text. The man, as the directly addressed ‘vous’ is foregrounded, yet the woman appears with him, in the opening sentence of the récit: ‘Vous devriez ne pas la connaître, l’avoir trouvée partout à la fois...’ The relation begins without knowledge and this will remain the ground of their encounter throughout. The man is given the

56 Ibid., p.7.
active role of finding the woman; she is a diffused quantity, everywhere at once, to his singularity. The sentence continues, relentlessly listing the places that the woman may be found to occupy: ‘...dans un hôtel, dans une rue, dans un train, dans un bar...’ (anonymous milieux, which make her an Everywoman, a banal, universal quantity) ‘...dans un livre, dans un film...’ (she is a fantasy creation, not flesh and blood, a cultural construction) ‘en vous, en toi, au hasard de ton sexe dressé dans la nuit qui appelle où se mettre, où se débarrasser des pleurs qui le remplissent’ (she is inside the man, intimately within, but simultaneously responds to his desiring need to spend himself and express his desolation). Ultimately, the woman is a receptacle for the man’s sperm, somewhere to put his erection. The man, then, and his desire, are directly present. The man could be the reader; it could be the reader that the narrator addresses as ‘vous’. The narrator could be claiming to intuit the reader’s desire, casually identifying it as masculine, a desire for a receptacle. The place is not important; a train, a bar, what is crucial is that there should be a way to rid oneself of one’s need, ‘se débarrasser de ses pleurs.’ It could be a book or a film, will be this book, La maladie de la mort: this book is where you, the reader, hope to displace your desire. This self-referentiality is explicit, for example in the way the two lovers construct the scene between them, in a question-and-answer dialogue: ‘Elle demande aussi: Qu’est-ce qu’on entend? Vous dites: La mer. Elle demande: Où est-elle? Vous dites: là, derrière le mur de la chambre.’ Duras is drawing attention to the provisional nature of the text, the construction of it in response to need.

Why, then, should the story be of a bitter conflict? Is it because the body of the text cannot assuage the deathly solitude of the reader’s unnamed existence? Is it because

57 Ibid., p.13.
consciousness is a trapped thing producing desire as an endless, futile attempt to escape from itself into the boundless otherness (perhaps figured here as the sea behind the wall of the room) from which, against which, its existence has been forged? The impossibility has something to do with the woman. Plucked from the outside, anywhere and nowhere, she is not, however, capable of or even inclined to respond to the man’s demand for total reception. She will not or cannot love him, name him, listen to him. She represents another way of being, one which does not deny the body, which expresses joy. Most importantly, perhaps, she has boundaries, which she defends in her refusals, her mockery and rejection, even in her sleep.

Or could the lovers’ war be necessary to the reader’s investment? I have tried to show how Duras’s *L’homme assis dans le couloir* stages a psychic event of erotic invasion. In *La maladie de la mort* a seemingly benign fantasy - of being set free from over-alert, insomniac consciousness into a receptive physicality - turns into a narcissistic and masochistic fantasy of humiliated exclusion. This constituent element is noted by Blanchot, who remarks that the man’s unhappiness gives him ‘une certaine gloire’ and that he may believe himself to be ‘le roi du malheur’.

This interpretation emphasises the aspect of male omnipotence; it might be useful, though, to see his struggles as engaging a genuine vulnerability or risk. With the reader, he exposes his fragility to the woman, under certain conditions which do not turn out to afford him much protection. Paradoxically it is she who is described as defenceless: ‘le corps est sans défense aucune’, and her weakness incites violence, so each time he perceives it, he is filled with the thought of killing her. Yet the certitude of her few pronunciations reveal her as a formidable counterpart. The force of her will, her capacity to take

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58 Blanchot, *La communauté inavouable*, p.89.
sexual pleasure in him, her resistance to his demands all conspire to shatter his attempts at self-affirmation. They also regenerate the solitude he regains at the end of the récit. The room in which he lives no longer contains her. His experience of eroticism is inextricably linked to loss; the last sentence of the piece is: 'Ainsi cependant vous avez pu vivre cet amour de la seule façon qui puisse se faire pour vous, en le perdant avant qu’il soit advenu.' In the interior space of the book, it can be confessed that what was desired most was to refind oneself, at the end of the adventure, shattered and alone.

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Ibid., p.57.
Conclusion

I.

The ethical potential for a more consciously masochistic body politic depends on the recognition of the incurability of the subject, the ubiquity of pathology. Sickness is not something that happens to some people occasionally, but to everyone: as Susan Sontag puts it, 'illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick.'

Redefining masochism is part of a larger move to revalue and decriminalise the so-called perversions, homosexuality in particular and more recently, fetishism, to free up the thinking around them and further, to face the challenges they embody. Within this debate, psychoanalysis has a difficult part to play, part of this difficulty resulting from the fact that one cannot refer to it as if it were a unitary, consistent discourse. Masochism may have at first seemed a great find for psychology, but when it came to Freud, appears as an elusive, problematic quantity which he handles gingerly, even inexpertly. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* shows a Freud at his most visionary, postulating a primary masochism, but for decades the hints thrown out there remained undeveloped. Not until the sophisticated post-Lacanian literary psychoanalysis of Jean Laplanche did masochism begin to be refounded centrally as a universal subject position in the infant's phantasmatic manoeuvring. The two important thinkers of masochism, Gilles Deleuze and Leo Bersani, make of it a literary matter: Deleuze comments that, following Reik, 'il faut faire intervenir

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1 Sontag, *Illness as metaphor*, p.3.
la fantaisie comme le lieu originaire du masochisme'.² The trajectory we have followed appears to be a century-long detour: masochism is taken up as the property of psychology, stays there as uncomfortable and somewhat unwelcome guest, and now inches back towards its original home in the literary.

Attempts at applying psychoanalytic methodologies to the literary text, tracing in their stylistic patterns and narrative formulations an underlying symptomatology of hidden trauma³ seem to me unproductive as ways of playing out the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature, where the former is seen as ventriloquising through the latter. Could there be a more self-reflexive way for psychoanalysis to approach literature? If psychoanalysis were to open up, masochistically, to the risk of the literary text, its identity might be modified, its ambitions redirected. In this rite of passage, psychoanalysis would recognise its own mortality,⁴ releasing itself from those historical narratives in which it represents an unassailable orthodoxy.

Psychoanalysis is on line for the rite of passage I have suggested. Sonu Shamdasani writes in an introduction to a recent collection of essays: 'As fertile moments of the traversal of psychoanalysis are essayed, it, together with its surrounds, are reconceived. This enables the release of issues which no longer sit snugly within a disciplinarian closure of identity. In the process, psychoanalysis reveals an unmasterable exteriority crypted within itself. Issues emerge, or take on forms, that are no longer contained or controlled

² Deleuze, Présentation de Sacher-Masoch, p.109.
³ This is, for example, the approach of Massé in In the Name of Love.
⁴ As Malcolm Bowie beautifully writes: 'All productions of the human mind are already marked with their death's head: fading, failing, falling short, falling apart, lapsing and expiring are their native domain.' Lacan, p.10.
Many thinkers are addressing psychoanalysis from its borderlines, questioning its narratives, opening it up to philosophy, questions of sexual difference, and post-colonial discourses. This work may also open up possibilities for a literary re-reading of psychoanalysis. This is not intended as a gesture towards the rediscovery of Freud as a psychoanalyst in Woolf's clothing, but a tracing of the ways in which literature in its many forms has related to the psychoanalytic project, informing it, impeding it, parodying it, pillaging it, competing with it and even, on occasion, adulating it. The work of Sam Weber is an indication of one fruitful way forward.

And literature has not forgotten the installed figure of the psychoanalyst, though he is almost tiresomely cast as somewhat faceless, clinical, full of rigid pronouncements, lacking in any capacity to detect and respond to nuance. Krafft-Ebing and Sacher-Masoch were not the only writer and analyst unable to see eye to eye. What has twentieth century literature been able to dramatise of the nature of the analyst/analysand relationship, the question of transference, when the writer returns from couch to writing-desk? This area also opens up as a potentially exciting one for the interface of the two disciplines.

What much literature has in common with all psychoanalysis is an emphasis on the centrality of the human subject, a subject who is always in relation to another, always relational. The thought that emerges from this context is equally communicatory rather than monadic. For both disciplines, lived experience, with all its flavour of the unpredicted,

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5 Shamdasani and Münchow, (eds.) Speculations after Freud, p.xv.
6 For example, Borch-Jacobsen, The Freudian Subject.
7 For example, Kofman, L'énigme de la femme.
8 For example, Spivak, In Other Worlds, and The Post-colonial Critic.
idiosyncratic, traumatic, raw and cooked remains the strongest, most varied and vivid challenge. For other disciplines, for example, philosophy (excluding the Eastern philosophies) this is not necessarily the case. Rather than restricting psychoanalytic theory and literary criticism, human experience provides both with a living, sensitive, complex core, describes a space of infinite possibility realised within the actuality of everyday life. An interlocution between the two disciplines might be found to offer much insight which could be extrapolated for use within other areas of the humanities.

II.

Women’s masochism is less written about than men’s because, presumably, it is seen as closer to the norm. Existentially, women’s masochism is ubiquitous: theoretically, it is either absent or used a blanket feminist term to describe women’s embracing of oppression. But in an alternative version of feminism, what is privileged is empowerment rather than self-chastisement: and women are after all bound up in the world of men, for better or for worse, bound up in the complexities of response, from collusion to defiance, that make oversimplifying generalities unhelpful. I have rather attempted to edge feminine masochism into the foreground, not as the shadowy other half of masculine sadism but as a specific entity. If sensibility has been what men have most been afraid of betraying in the present century, femininity has been its derided repository: a Pandora’s box of weak susceptibilities. This unwanted property has been reclaimed by Marguerite Duras, in a sense: she depicts excessive feminine love, for example, in La douleur, yet with a probing clarity and tough minimalism which convey a courage and seriousness not to be ignored. In Duras, feminine masochism is a dauntless exploration or an erotic trajectory, a nuanced
representation of feminine lower depths. Reassertion of the integrity of women’s passionate centre is a feminist move, even if this is about a woman’s sexual surrender to a man. The very self-possession of Duras’s woman protagonist, as she allows herself to be sexually subjugated or asks her lover to brutalise her, disturbs normative views of womanhood and of the limits of writing by women.

Power is always a matter of eroticism, in a relationship that pulls both ways. Eroticism, always central for protagonists of gay literature, has only been feebly taken up so far within feminist thinking. Feminism is known for a militant opposition to pornography, for an anti-sexual image. One of the challenges that Duras’s masochistic writing throws out is to put sexuality - in all its inherent riskiness and unleashing of raw energies - onto a feminist critical agenda. Women’s writing is the crucible for an experimental, adaptable feminism that can move out of reactiveness to men yet engage at a fundamental level. Duras’ writing, as I have tried to show, positions the reader in a masochistic way, but the surrender is to a text which is already relational, connecting reader to writer through an inscription of an overwhelming response to the world. Masochistic textuality brings the author back to life for a moment, restoring through the connection the importance of the act of writing. Masochistic literature, with its exploitation of autobiography, is never anonymous: it may even be a kind of self-portraiture. For women writers it can mean the chance to explore the interiorities of feminine experience, to imaginatively incorporate plural suffering positions. Masochism takes women’s imagination through the pain barrier in a jouissance that shatters but regenerates.
What is the fundamental gesture within masochism, is it possible to come down to a characteristic description? As an aesthetic, and a way of being in the world, it can act as an antidote to heroic mythology and assertive individualism, emphasising sensitivity rather than strength, the balletic rather than the brutal. Masochism is closer to the introspective rather than the expressive, able to locate a self which can thrive within melancholia and loss. The masochist is unlikely to be a conformist: Lyn Cowan points out the Promethean aspect of masochism, and it is worth here quoting Shelley’s Prometheus reviling the king of the Gods who has bound him to an icy, barren mountain-top:

Three thousand years of sleep-unsheltered hours,
And moments aye divided by keen pangs
Till they seemed years, torture and solitude,
Scorn and despair, - these are mine empire:
More glorious far than that which thou surveyest
From thine unenvied throne, O Mighty God!\(^\text{10}\)

The strange mixture of humility and arrogance that Jonathan Dollimore detects in the icon of Christ crucified is evidently also a strong presence. The masochistic position refuses omnipotence, hardly though resentfully endures the punishment meted out for stealing the God’s fire. And in spite of the fetishistic element of masochism, it is linked to an idealism of discipline, a necessary detour in the move to masochistic sublimation. An austerity is

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\(^{10}\) ‘Prometheus Unbound’ in Shelley: Selected Poems, pp.33-4.
detectable here, a perverse determination to be taxed rather than too quickly rewarded, to recognise one's allegiance to Thanatos as well as Eros.

Wanda, the ex-wife of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, describes at the end of her autobiographical book how, hearing of his death, she attended his funeral. A minor interruption left her free to approach the funeral bier, to take a last look at his face; afterwards, order was restored into the ceremony. The disturbance was over, but in the meantime, death had been glimpsed, in a personal, intimate way.

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