



Masochism; An Interpretation Of Coldness And Cruelty. Together With The Entire Text Of Venus In Furs

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Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (b. 1835) was a Professor of History and a celebrated German novelist of the latter half of the 19th century. Here, in *Venus in Furs*, Masoch's most famous novel, one finds the entire constellation of symbols that has come to characterize the masochistic syndrome - fetishes, whips, disguises, fur-clad women, contracts, humiliations, punishment and of course the perpetual and volatile presence of a terrible coldness. Yet what we actually encounter has little to do with these reductive caricatures.. "Deleuze's essay is an attempt to restore to Masoch's work the rigorous and informed philosophical examination that is due it. Deleuze's essay - the most profound study yet produced on the relations between Masochism and Sadism - seeks to develop and explain Masoch's peculiar way of 'desexualizing' love while at the same time sexualizing the entire history of humanity.

Masochism; An Interpretation Of Coldness And Cruelty. Together With The Entire Text Of Venus In Furs Details

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Eyre says

Everything I wanted out of a Deleuzian analysis of sadomachocism--eg. the sadist has felt pain/the masochist has identified with the abuser. Deleuze analyzes sadism and masochism as separate literary entities, covering their underlying political agendas, aligning Sade with the Revolution of 1789 and Masoch with the Revolutions of 1848. The absurdity of laws, contracts and punishment are revealed. I enjoy Deleuze's literary approach to Freud and Masoch, though I do think that his analysis is not a replacement for case studies. It is useful, though, as a lens by which to view culture. A lot of objections to the text I have read online here and on blogs I feel miss the point of Deleuzian analysis entirely. If he can be criticized for anything it is superficiality--not that he does not 'get' the motivations of real life masochists. The only thing I felt was lacking is this: that in 'Difference and Repetition' irony and repetition are 'of the heart,' but in the masochistic fantasy they are said to reflect an underlying coldness. Obviously, coldness is a theme of 'Venus', but if there is any 'heart' in masochistic fantasy, it is in transgressive irony and in the excessive sincerity which Wanda identifies in Masoch. It is only intense sincerity which would lead Masoch to an obsessive fear directed towards the limits of the social contract. Does he not simply desire, like the martyred saint, to push reverence to its absolute limit? Also, one might say, in a Deleuzian manner, that an obsession with coldness is actually an obsession with an absent warmth. All and all killer text, though, and a great edition to boot. I love that Venus in Furs comes second and, of course, I really love that Dara Birnbaum did the cover.

sologdin says

Apparently Sacher-Masoch actually did enjoy to “be subjected to punishments, humiliations, and even acute physical pain by an opulent fur-clad woman with a whip” (10). His series, the Heritage of Cain, includes the famous Venus in Furs, and was “intended first to express the burden of crime and suffering inherited by humanity” (12):

this apparent cruelty conceals the more secret theme of the coldness of Nature, of the steppe, of the icy image of the Mother wherein Cain discovers his own destiny; the coldness of the stern mother is in reality a transmutation of cruelty from which the new man emerges. The ‘mark’ of Cain indicates how the ‘heritage’ is to be used. Cain and Christ bear the same mark, which leads to the crucifixion of Man ‘who knows no sexual love, no property, no fatherland, no cause, no work.’ (12)

So, it's not just about butthole pleasures, and the rusty trombone, and the dirty Sanchez, and the Cincinnati bowtie, and the pussy juice cocktail.

Sacher-Masoch is not to be “transposed” with de Sade, with “the instincts reversed,” some sort of bogus “unity of opposites,” an “unfair assumption of complementarity and dialectical unity” (13). Rather, when “we read Masoch we become aware that his universe has nothing to do with that of Sade” (id.). Based on the medical distinction between syndrome and symptom, author proposes that “sado-masochism is a syndrome” (14). In reading the history of medicine, Deleuze notes that “the doctor does not invent the illness, he

dissociates symptoms that were previously grouped together, and links up others that were dissociated” (15).

That their names have been used to designate purported diseases (“two basic perversions”) is evidence of “the efficiency of literature” (15): “Sade and Masoch present unparalleled configurations of symptoms and signs” (16). When he coined *masochism*, Krafft-Ebing “was giving Masoch credit for having redefined a clinical entity not merely in terms of the link between pain and sexual pleasure, but in terms of something more fundamental connected with bondage and humiliation” (id).

Regarding de Sade:

In a text that ought to invalidate all theories relating Sade to Nazism, Georges Bataille explains that the language of Sade is paradoxical because it is essentially that of a victim. Only the victim can describe torture; the torturer necessarily uses the hypocritical language of established order and power. ‘As a general rule the torturer does not use the language of violence exerted by him in the name of established authority; he uses the language of authority.’ (17)

The *120 Days of Sodom* “hinges on tales told to the libertines by ‘women chroniclers,’ and in principle the heroes [sic] may not take any initiative in anticipation of these tales” (18). In Sacher-Masoch, by contrast, “love affairs are always set in motion by anonymous letters, by the use of pseudonyms or by advertisements in newspapers. They must be regulated by contracts that formalize and verbalize the behavior of the partners” (18); all sex acts must be promised and described prior to their occurrence. Neither of these writers counts as pornography, but are rather “pornology because its erotic language cannot be reduced to the elementary functions of ordering and describing” (18).

In de Sade, “the libertine may put on an act of trying to convince and persuade [...] but the intention to convince is merely apparent, for nothing is in fact more alien to the sadist than the wish to convince, to persuade, in short to educate. He is interested in something quite different, namely to demonstrate that reasoning itself is a form of violence” (18). In the course of the apparent reasoning, “the acts of violence inflicted on the victims are a mere reflection of a higher form of violence to which the demonstration testifies” (19). Sadism is broken into two components: the ‘personal’ (“directs and describes the personal violence of the sadist as well as his individual tastes” (19)) and the ‘impersonal’ (a “higher factor [...] identifies the impersonal violence with an Idea of pure reason, with a terrible demonstration capable of subordinating the first element” (20)).

Sacher-Masoch has a “similar transcendence of the imperative and the descriptive toward a higher function” (20): “But in this case it is all persuasion and education” (id.). Instead of a victim being tortured by someone “enjoying her all the more because she is unconsenting and unpersuaded,” the masochist is a “victim [sic] in search of a torturer and who needs to educate, persuade, and conclude an alliance with the torturer” (20). Sadism accordingly requires no advertisements; “the masochist draws up contracts while the sadist abominates and destroys them” (id.) (for the masochist, “the contract represents the ideal form of the love-relationship” (75)). The sadists needs “institutions,” by contrast. These two types correspond to the medieval notion of traffic with the devil: “the sadist thinks in terms of institutionalized possession, the masochist in terms of contractual alliance” (20). Also: “While Sade is spinozistic and employs demonstrative reason, Masoch is platonic and proceeds by dialectical imagination” (22).

Whereas de Sade’s provocations are “obscene in themselves,” Sacher-Masoch’s are notable for their “unusual decency” (25). For the masochist, humiliation is a secondary gain; “we never see the naked body of the woman torturer; it is always wrapped in furs. The body of the victim [sic] remains in a strange state of indeterminacy except where it receives the blows” (26). Sadism however is rooted in “negation,” both as a

“partial process and pure negation as a totalizing Idea” (id.). The sadist is disappointed in the impossibility of the perfect crime and has “an internal necessity that he evolves the idea of a delusion” (27). The sadist (in the *120 Days*) “find excitement not in ‘what is here,’ but in ‘what is not here,’ the absent Object, ‘the idea of evil’” (28). We might note also “the monotony of sadism,” its repetitiveness (id.).

As to fetishism: for de Sade, it occurs “only in a secondary or distorted sense”; it is “divested of its essential relation to disavowal and suspense and passes into the totally different context of negativity and negation” (32). In Sacher-Masoch, “there can be no masochism without fetishism in the primary sense” (id.): “It is no exaggeration to say that Masoch was the first novelist to make use of suspense as an essential ingredient of romantic fiction” (33). The latter’s “aesthetic and dramatic suspense” vs. the former’s “mechanical, cumulative repetition” (34). This is why Sacher-Masoch has no obscenity: it is suspended (“The whip or the sword that never strikes, the fur that never discloses the flesh, the heel that is forever descending” (70)). For de Sade, “imperatives and descriptions transcend themselves toward the higher function of demonstration”; for Sacher-Masoch, “imperatives and descriptions also achieve a transcendent function, but it is of a mythical and dialectical order. Ergo, “the fundamental distinction between sadism and masochism can be summarized in the contrasting processes of the negative and negation on the one hand, and of disavowal and suspense on the other” (35).

Some suggestion that a certain “excess” is required for eroticism, and in deploying the excess, these writers set up a “counter-language” (37). Dunno. But: no doubt that “a genuine sadist could never tolerate a masochistic victim” (40), and no doubt likewise that “neither would the masochist tolerate a truly sadistic torturer” (41); the former sends away the voluntary, and the latter needs to persuade. These incompatibilities militate against any sort of complementarity:

The woman torturer of masochism cannot be sadistic precisely because she is in the masochistic situation, she is an integral part of it, a realization of the masochistic fantasy. She belongs in the masochistic world, not in the sense that she has the same tastes as her victim, but because her ‘sadism’ is of a kind never found in the sadist; it is as it were the double or the reflection of masochism. The same is true of the sadist. The victim cannot be masochistic, not merely because the libertine would be irked if she were to experience pleasure, but because the victim of the sadist belongs entirely to the world of sadism. (41)

Some philistine stuff follows regarding the ‘types’ of ‘women’ in Sacher-Masoch (47 ff), laden with untenable principles of differentiation (e.g., “as a reaction to man’s [sic] heightened consciousness woman developed sentimentality” (54) eww?). And then after is an even worse chapter on the Freudian implications (57 ff). C’mon already. (It does draw out a contrast: “there is between sadism and masochism an irreducible dissymmetry: sadism stands for the active negation of the mother and the inflation of the father (who is placed above the law [cf. Agamben]); masochism proceeds by a twofold disavowal, a positive, idealizing disavowal of the mother (who is identified with the law) and an invalidating disavowal of the father (who is expelled from the symbolic order)” (68)).

Chapter on Sacher-Masoch’s express aesthetic doctrine, which he terms “supersensualism,” which describes a “cultural state of transmuted sensuality” wherein “the senses become ‘theoreticians’” (69) (I know, right?). The masochistic ‘hero’ is exercised by works of art (“women become exciting when they are indistinguishable [!!!!] from cold statues” (69). We had already read that the women of Sacher-Masoch are “always the same woman” (47) with whip and furs, despite outward appearances—a fungibility that is supergross. But here, even as the masochistic torturers all enter into a zone of indistinction, so too she coincides without remainder with inanimate objects—very much Agamben’s reading of Aristotle’s doctrine of slavery in *The Use of Bodies*—the masochist ‘uses’ the body of the torturer as though it were inanimate. Even so, “masochism is a state of waiting; the masochist experiences waiting in its pure form” (71).

In de Sade, however, the libertines “are not art lovers” (69). Rather, he relies “on quantitative techniques of accumulation and acceleration, mechanically grounded in a materialistic theory” (70). Great little note that equates the masochist with ancient slaves, who were allegedly held via contract (likely true in some cases, such as those held as *sponsor*, say)—“the masochist appears to be held by real chains, but in fact he is bound by his word alone” (75), which kinda rubbishes the call to arms at the end of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* regarding “you have nothing to lose but your chains”; if the proletarians are bound by word alone, who cares about chains? We know from Blake that the salient bounds are words alone:

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infants cry of fear,
In every voice: in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear

Marx & Engels barking up the wrong tree, then? Mind-forged manacles are basically everywhere; de Sade, recall, “thinks in terms of ‘institutions,’ Masoch in terms of ‘the contract’” (76-77). The latter “presupposes in principle the free consent of the contracting parties” whereas the former “determine a long-term state of affairs which is both involuntary and inalienable” (77). Both have political implications. On the one hand, de Sade “rejects any contractual conception of the republican regime and is even more strongly against the idea of the law” (77-78). He preferred “the revolutionary republic as an institution based on opposition to both law and contract,” perhaps presented with some irony, however (78). The politics of Sacher-Masoch are “the humorous converse of Sade” (id.).

Some reflections thereafter on Plato, Kant, Kafka, more Freud, &c.

Recommended for those who may be disturbed when Krafft-Ebing used their name to designate a perversion, bearers of the mark of Cain, and readers who appear to be held by real chains but in fact are bound by words alone.

Adam says

I confess a preexisting lukewarmness toward Deleuze stemming from a battle with "Bergsonism" years ago: the climb was wearying and the view unrewarding. But I read Sade recently, and as of today I'm still married, so it was time to find out just how much of a Masochist I must be. Cuz we all must be, more or less, now that Sade's prescription for universal prostitution has been enshrined as economic dogma and daily routine for both sexes. Furs and whips are optional.

The novel is more of a lugubrious melodrama than a racy romance. Radically distinguishing psychological from sensual masochism for a moment, the sad fatalism is summarized in tones echoing Dostoyevsky's unforgettable "Make us your slaves, but give us bread!" The narrator begs on page 202: "I will do whatever you command, I will be your slave, your thing; you may treat me as you please, but do not reject me. I shall be lost, I cannot live without you." And then to himself: "The comic side of my situation is that I can escape but do not want to; I am ready to endure anything as soon as she threatens to set me free." [Happy Valentine's Day.] The imperious Wanda even chastises him for being too weak to properly kill himself after he crawls back sopping wet and surrenders the dagger. So if you don't have enough pain, sadness, impotent longing, failure, shame, and humiliation in your own miserable life, have some of Severin's!

Deleuze is at least correct that masochism (and sadism) must not be confined to the hackneyed shades of a

"pleasure-in-pain" continuum. There is not, as he repeats and repeats and repeats, a single sadomasochistic complex. Yet his overweening effort to categorically separate what masochism IS from what sadism IS and ne'er shall the twain meet is unconvincing, forced and a bit sloppy. He argues like one of the ancient Greek rhetoricians who had to prove their skill by defending an obviously indefensible position, i.e., Helen of Troy was actually pretty cool. Deleuze's account is less interesting than those of Freud or Lacan, whom he purports to be critiquing. However, the chapter "Humor, Irony and the Law" stands out as some of his best writing.

The question "Why do people hug their chains?" has been asked and answered in myriad ways. The clinical riddle of masochism proper is not entirely separate from questions of mundane submissiveness and passivity, but they ought not be conflated. I can't say that in future inquiries I'll likely be adducing Masoch as a model of fulfilling intimacy or Deleuze as a satisfying theoretical touchstone.

Madelyn says

i guess i'm not quite sure what to make of this book; it just doesn't seem like any of deleuze's other work.

Oriana says

Aww, I'd forgotten all about this book. Many moons ago, I was going to write my senior thesis on, roughly, "Sadism and Masochism in the Stories of Franz Kafka," with this book as one of my primary sources. I inhaled this book (and several others), wrote about 30 pages, consulted with the ancient visiting Kafka scholar whose class I'd been taking, wrote another dozen pages, then realized I'd rather put out my own eyes than write any more on this vaguely creepy topic.

I did a creative thesis instead. (Looking back, maybe I was kind of a wimp.)

Khashayar Mohammadi says

Very Poor psychoanalysis mostly stemming from false assumptions and fallacies of the human sexuality. Deleuze tries REALLY HARD to prove that Sadism and Masochism are COMPLETELY different and in no way compliment each other; and although I agree with very fundamental differences in Masochism and Sadism, mostly with Masoch's incorporation of aesthetics and contractual fantasies and Sade's abolishment of aesthetics through repetitive institutionalized tyranny, most of the essay is built on false premises that just do not hold.

Lesley says

I really loved (is that the right word?) Venus in Furs. I was captivated by it. I read it in one sitting and need to read it again.

Deleuze is one of those French guys I probably should have read in grad school, but didn't. He's going to

explore whether sadism and masochism are actually two sides of the same condition/phenomenon/psychological predisposition... I bet they're not.

thos. says

not very sexy

Conrad says

Deleuze's section of this book is pretty good - he develops his theory that sadism and masochism are not two sides of the same coin, but separate pathologies - er, separate technologies of subversion.

Sacher-Masoch's prose is beyond all help, however; it's a shame that something so hot in theory is so boring in practice, but then Deleuze, reputed to be among the most vanilla of French theorists in his own personal life, must appreciate that.

Stephen says

I never realized masochism and politics go so well together. And this from someone who enjoys watching MSNBC. Deleuze begins his march through this insensitive topic by drawing a distinction between it and sadism through the uses of humor:

"A popular joke tells of the meeting between a sadist and a masochist; the masochist says: 'Hurt me.' The sadist replies: 'No.' This is a particularly stupid joke, not only because it is unrealistic but because it foolishly claims competence to pass judgment on the world of perversions. It is unrealistic because a genuine sadist could never tolerate a masochistic victim. Neither would the masochistic tolerate a truly sadistic torturer."

Reading this I wrote in the margins, "Ha, ha. It looks like ole Gilles is having some fun at the expense of the Left. Oh no, here comes Badiou and Zizek with their pitchforks!" But I wasn't that far off in my facetiousness: Deleuze is making an argument for what perverse behavior and counter-intuitive thinking can tell us about our politics.

How do you explain Kafka and friends overcome with laughter at Kafka's reading of The Trial? How come disciples of Socrates couldn't contain themselves either at the death of their beloved teacher? Or put another way, why do we allow ourselves to be manipulated by the narrative conceits of crappy novelists?

Waiting, disavowal, suspense, fetishism, fantasy aren't isolated, private phenomena. One needs to believe that one is not dreaming, even when one is. Marquis de Sade's Juliette advises two weeks of abstaining from lustful behavior. If you can manage that then lie down and imagine for yourself different wanton acts. One will move you more powerfully than the rest and it will become like an obsession - write it down!!

Sounds like a cheap form of psychoanalysis. But this leads to the penultimate chapter, "Humor, Irony and the Law." In one of his notes Pascal suggests that God is no more than all the mores in a culture as a limit defined by its own law. The wrath of God is no more than the chorus of everyone's disapproval we hear in

our own language, which they have yet to address to us directly (thus, nightmares and bad dreams). Plato set up "The Good" as the basis of all law: Christianity followed. Kant subverted this basis, changing it to "The Law" itself: our current human rights regime followed. What is "The Law", really? Who knows, since it's as unknowable as God. We in the West have simply replaced one inscrutable world system for another, even as atheists are convinced they have all the answers. "The Good" is now dependent on "The Law" and Kafka found all this amusing:

"Even guilt and punishment do not tell us what the law is," Deleuze writes, "but leave it in a state of indeterminacy equaled only by the extreme specificity of the punishment. This is the world described by Kafka."

A friend of mine read *The Goldfinch* recently. She was stopped dead in her tracks by Tattt quoting Nietzsche: "We have art in order not to die from the truth." Looking Nietzsche's line up online she found everyone quoting it and no one interested in its origins. "Radiohead reviewers like to quote it erroneously (too)," she discovered. Unlike Tattt quoting it optimistically the words actually come from a Nietzsche entry labeled Pessimism in Art. This friend, brilliant as ever, describes for us the masochism others receive from novel reading she is unwilling to allow herself, "The increasing delay in the plot: those narrative deferrals which deliberate teasings I'll never get used to - just tell them about your dead phone Theo! - and that judder to an halt only when the requisite chapter of wisdom is served." After considering Nietzsche's words ("How liberating is Dostoevsky!") she appends this excellent thought, "No beauty as consolation here."

peiman-mir5 rezakhani says

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Markas Mešk?nas says

inappropriate enjoyment

Bradley Nelson says

A bookseller at Spoonbill and Whatever in Williamsburg told me that he didn't find Deleuze to be a "systematic thinker." Pssh!! Read this and it will get you thinking (rhizomatically) about the world in terms of sadistic and masochistic situations. Very systematic, indeed.

philosovamp says

Deleuze does his usual goddamn thing: there is a dualism or unity that he wants to break apart (sadomasochism, or sadism vs masochism, as opposed to, erm, sadism and masochism), there is a neglected thinker he wants to give their just due (Masoch), he pulls in all sorts of different subjects (psychoanalysis,

yes, but also politics, aesthetics, and Kant), he does so in a pretty readable manner (in sharp distinction to his original philosophical works), and he throws out some ideas that are possibly correct, maybe relatable to your life (long-distance relationships are a positively perverse form of masochistic suspension, by the way), and certainly interesting. That's a nice thing. On the last point, though: the final chapters, on Freud's Eros and Thanatos as Deleuze interprets them in sadism and masochism, are quite muddled.*

As a reader of Deleuze, this text most clearly connects to Anti-Oedipus and has a shadier connection to Difference and Repetition.

A book I'd like to compare this to that I've read recently is Bataille's Erotism; while Bataille borrowed extensively from writers like Nietzsche for his conceptual approach (Erotism is basically a horny The Birth of Tragedy), his ambitions were quite high and he surveyed eroticism and religion extensively. Here, Deleuze goes his own way, haphazardly builds his own conceptual approach, but is very humble and restrained in the material he covers.

Hm? Oh yes. So I would recommend this book if you're interested in the subject, are deep into Deleuze, or possibly shallowly into Deleuze and don't want to tackle the big hard books yet, or want to schizoanalyze some frustrating bullshit love life you have and find Freud and his minions far too rigid.

*Note: I've never read Beyond the Pleasure Principle. I was also enjoying a couple (few) Jack & Dr. Peppers, which is much tastier than Jack & Coke imo, at the time.

Julian Mathews says

Deleuze uncouples Masochism and Sadism from what he identifies as the “sadomasochistic entity”—a misdiagnosed fusion of the two, first in *Psychopathia Sexualis* and later erroneously reinforced by Freud—by arguing that both perversions are different in kind, rather than in degree. Sadism is essentially institutional, anarchic, apathetic, employing the quantitative power of demonstrative reason in an attempt to kill the mother and the ego in service of the superego, while Masochism is aesthetic, qualitative, cold, cruel, relies on the contract and employs suspense and disavowal to expel the superego and father in favor of a de- and re-sexualized ego, the new man under auspice of the Oral Mother.

Deleuze at his most overtly psychoanalytic, but perhaps most accessible since the subject is singular and focused.
