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ANGELAKI

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“TWENTY PARAGRAPHS OF WRITTEN INSTRUCTIONS”

using perniola’s enigma and derrida’s autoimmunity to read power and freedom in masochism

Richard Von Krafft-Ebing reports:

A. Moll ... quotes a number of cases of complete masochism ... among them that of a man suffering from sexual perversion, who sent written instructions, containing twenty paragraphs, to a man engaged for this purpose, who was to treat and abuse him like a slave.¹

Why would a man dream of being a slave? What is the Eros of economic and racial captivity? Why would you pay for it? The logic of payment and captivity in Moll’s case is far from simple, and in it is embodied an obscure account of power and freedom: a man wants to be a slave; he wants to pay someone to stage it: the man he pays is a servant and a master at the same time, bound by twenty paragraphs of written instructions clearly laying out for him how he is to be in control. He has no choice in how to exercise power. Power here is ambiguous and has become dissociated from freedom and agency. The complex configuration of power is also a re-configuration of freedom: the man who gets what he wants has power exercised over him, and the one who exercises power has no choice about how he does it: power without agency, powerlessness with agency.

But there is also a racial politics here: we are talking about slavery after all, at the end of the nineteenth century, the century of the greatest self-consciousness about slavery in the history of the West, a self-consciousness from which it has never recovered, one that is an emblem of the will-to-colonialism the West has never succeeded in shaking off. Why is it erotic to be in the place of the person who, because of their weak position in the chain of global economic power, which in turn can be attributed to their race, has no power and can be bought and sold, made to work, used and punished at will? The nineteenth century was an era of the West’s self-consciousness of slavery because it was also an era of freedom and of subjectivity, most insistently expressed as the liberal individual’s autonomy as the agent of political decision, economic independence and privacy of desire. Why would you use this autonomy to reduce it? Why would you exercise your freedom to give it away? Why at this point of history when freedom was being cried out for everywhere, for whole races and classes of people in their specific entrapment, but for all individuals as well, something whose value was to be taken for granted – the gift that came with the gift of human being itself – something whose absence was not only a social or political structural imperfection, but something appalling, soon unthinkable, as slavery still practised in many guises in the world today is unthinkable and widely unthought by us now, why then or why now, would someone dream of being a slave?² And not just dream of being a slave, work at it, design it, pay for it, prepare twenty paragraphs of written instructions and *engage* someone to treat you as their slave, order them to do it, bind them to be your master? What does this say about our

discourses of (individual, civic, national, racial, economic, etc., etc.) *freedom*? Who would want not to be free, and why? And act it out in a context that ever since has been identified as irreducibly sexual? Why is sex the site of this imaginary and desired unfreedom? Only in sex is such absolute heresy to the Enlightenment consensus possible. In sex, we are not so amazed to find it. Sex somehow and for some reason suspends the logic of normal civil life, so men can play at being women, and women at being children, where we play at raping and being raped, beating and being beaten, hurting and being hurt, enslaving and being enslaved, things we would never do elsewhere in our lives, and that we would not allow to happen to others, if we could help it. Sex, then, is the place where we do what we do not believe in, and act out what we do not accept.

Slavery becomes something to seek and to plan. Is freedom so horrible? Or is the dream of unfreedom perhaps the greatest expression of our desire for freedom: a freedom from the individuality that dreams of being free? Or even the most unambiguous signifier of our achievement of freedom: the unfree do not dream of being unfree. The man who dreams of being unfree is a free and powerful man, and has the means to put his dream into practice, to bind someone to enslave him. The apotheosis of the twinned Western discourses of subjectivity and freedom, now seen as belonging forever together, is the right to political, economic and sexual autonomy. The isolation and identification of masochism as a sexual pathology takes place, therefore, at the historical moment when the elements that constitute it – subjectivity, desire, power and freedom – are conjoined as the most emphatic site of collective investment, not simply one that defined an epoch, but one that was claimed to be humanity's most inalienable mark. Masochism, then, must be a commentary on this particular configuration. Analysis of masochism must say something about this particular historical conjunction. Masochism is not restricted to erotic practice, therefore. It is rather a reconsideration of social power re-staged in the one zone (the erotic) where such aestheticised subjective critique can be played out most intensively and extensively.



“Why would anyone want to be dominated, given the risk?” Pat Califia asks. “Because it is a healing process,” is her answer. According to this account, the masochist's experience of sexual submission is transformative of subjectivity. Neither a distraction, nor an indulgence, masochistic play salves “old wounds and hunger.”³ According to Califia, the experience of the masochist then compensates for the suffering framed by a cruel environment which is unable to give normal comfort and satisfaction. It points a finger at the weakness of that environment. Would masochism be unnecessary if the environment were more accommodating? Califia does not say, but if this were the case, the loss of the pleasure of sadomasochism would surely be something to lament. In other words, there must be more to the pleasure of S/M than the mere relief from inadequacy or the pleasure of complaint.⁴

The masochist, to Califia, contests or confronts their environment. How? According to Califia, our sexual culture is one in which the cruel and highly sexualised administration of power is disavowed: “S/M recognises the erotic underpinnings of our system and seeks to reclaim them,” Califia writes.

There's an enormous hard-on beneath the priest's robe, the cop's uniform, the president's business suit, the soldier's khakis. But that phallus is powerful only

as long as it is concealed, elevated to the level of a symbol, never exposed or used in literal fucking ... In an S/M context, the uniforms and roles and dialogue become a parody of authority, a challenge to it, a recognition of its secret sexual nature.⁵

This explains the widespread hostility to S/M.

S/M challenges sexual normality, therefore, but because its vocabulary is one of dominance and subordination, it reveals, names and exposes power. The truth of power in this argument is a secret and the revelation of power, even in a direct re-staging of it – or “reclaiming” of it, as if it is stolen property – is dissent. Califia writes:

We select the most frightening, disgusting, or unacceptable activities and transmute them into pleasure. We make use of all the forbidden symbols and all the disowned emotions. S/M is a deliberate pre-meditated erotic blasphemy. It is a form of sexual extremism and sexual dissent.⁶

Two points need to be made here. Firstly, that this argument resonates with Michel Foucault’s influential post-Nietzschean account of “the undefined work of freedom,” as he calls it,⁷ where subjective transformation contests inherited limits, and at least suggests the “way out” of present circumstances and that still hopes to implement Kant’s definition of Enlightenment. It is part, then, of the postmodern re-definition of freedom, not as achieved autonomy nor as collective human horizon but as a sustained diachronic project of dissent, not necessarily to achieve clear goals but for its own sake.

Secondly, the argument proposes a series of theoretical problems about power. These problems revolve around the logic whereby power is contested by being re-staged. This is not to say that the S/M practices Califia advocates are merely collaborative with power. The hostility which they meet shows clearly that they are not, and the sense of aesthetic transgression they enact remains a bold provocation to more inhibited political activism (“Dworkinism,” Califia calls it), which Califia sees as positively harmful. Yet, the conventional generic terms by which we could normally understand what S/M is doing do not seem to apply. Is the manifest re-staging of power-play in order to contest the contemporary power regime really *parody*, as Califia claims? How could it be, when it is the power-play itself which gives such undiminished, even liberatory, pleasure? The enactment of society’s power as dissent from this power is positive. It is not at all ridicule. The logic of revelation of the secret on which Califia relies only takes us so far: the power is contested but is itself an object of unqualified and open-ended enthusiasm.

S/M power-play is dissent from power by way of conformity to it. It horrifies power, in both its established forms as well as all those other modes of dissent that would seek to re-make power around some model of liberal mutual respect and self-regard, but it is a new reformed regime of power nonetheless. It shows its dissent from power by revealing it but most of all by *loving* it and staging it as a kind of loving. The idea that what we see here, then, is merely the revelation of power’s dirty little secret does not go far enough to explain why the act of revelation is one of such positive, uncompromised and meaningful excitement. The discourse of the secret – that what S/M does is expose power’s hidden truth – does not explain why we should then make love to that power. There is some paradox at the heart of Califia’s account, one that is analogous to the play of power in masochism: why express, even indulge,

your freedom and power by giving them away? Why critique power by celebrating it? The trope of the secret does not explain the *doubleness* of masochism's treatment of subjectivity, freedom and power.

How, then, should we frame the problem in terms of subjectivity? S/M contests power by validating it. It is too simple to see this as a contradiction. This would imply that our relation to power is always simple, singular and articulable. The logic that evaluates things according to a measure of systematicity and consistency fails completely to grasp the logic of masochism, where a man not only seeks to be a slave but *orders* somebody to do it, writing twenty paragraphs with clear instructions from which the person who takes on the role of master cannot demur. In other words, masochism is a place where the enactment of power ("do this for me") and the suffering of power ("what are you doing to me?") become indistinguishable ("do this to me like this and only like this!"). Masochism is a zone where contradictory roles must be sustained, or else the whole project fails. The S/M that Califia identifies contradicts the thing it challenges not simply by re-staging it but by praising it. What way of thinking will help us understand this conundrum? It is the point of this article to evaluate and compare two alternative ways of re-thinking this situation: Mario Perniola's concept of the enigma and Jacques Derrida's trope of autoimmunity.



But who cares? Why does the subjectivity of the masochist matter? Are we not just dealing here with an eccentric and marginal fetish, or at best an isolated and minute sub-culture? The argument of this paper is that masochism, far from being a comical and unnecessary curiosity, reveals aspects of the modern and postmodern configuration of subjectivity, freedom and power; in other words, the era in which masochism arose to definition and analysis required it because it dramatised or summarised that era's impetus to make sexuality and power converge as subjectivity. The long continuing (para)-modern era has been one in which the increasingly desperate insistence on subjectivity as the primary site of human meaning has been challenged by unbridled aesthetic, philosophical and sexual experimentation with de-subjectification. Far from being the demise of the era of the subject, however, this exploration of the limits and *death* of the subject intensifies subjectivity as the privileged locus of cathexis and indeed of human being itself. When you shatter me, you make me more incredible and thus more real. My disappearance is what reveals me as both more precarious and more terrible, more daring and more dangerous, and more spectacular. When I am dispersed into a series of discontinuous and ephemeral aesthetic instances, or when I become a mere collocation of myriad sexualised pressure-points, what could be more *remarkable* than this non-me? I become a series of *other words*, endlessly re-invented, not as something to be but as the transition from one revolution to another without goal and without end, disgusting and mighty, beautiful and terrifying, awe-inspiring, dead and forever new and awake. From Freud to Foucault, the act of situating the subject and mapping its construction has never involved a demotion of subjectivity – a de-stabilisation of its most straitened and sanctioned denomination (the rational self) perhaps – but never less than the promotion and celebration of subjectivity as the most inalienable and perhaps the greatest human *chance*. In Foucault's "What is Enlightenment?," for example, we see the interrogation of inherited technologies of subjectivity not as the abandonment or surpassing of the subject as a site of cultural political patterning but the opposite, its intensification as the most crucial and definitive locus of creative dissent and a

content-less freedom. To Foucault, the very fact that subjectivity is the privileged place of the operation of power is what makes it not something to avoid or demote but the most crucial focus of our most serious political inventions. In other words, the culture of subjectivity that has arisen since modernity is one in which subjectivity has been intensified by being abandoned and made meaningful by being ruthlessly disestablished in a literally *end-less* aesthetic and sexual avant-gardism. Our culture of subjectivity, therefore, is a definitively masochistic one.

Our culture of power is similarly complex. Discourses of liberal freedom have, in different ways, celebrated power. This could take the form of the power that Hobbes saw as necessary to facilitate the individual's ability to fulfil his or her desire, something sought in the state of nature but only actually attainable once the constraints brought into place by sovereign power were instituted. It could also take the form of the fascination of liberal popular culture with the violence that guarantees its freedoms by war or unrestrained police action. The implied complaint of the *Law and Order* franchise against rights exercised in courts, for example, displays a longing for a power that will protect us from freedom nominally in order to guarantee that freedom.

In sum, we simultaneously and in the one act both promote and constrain power, freedom and subjectivity. *A man ... sent written instructions, containing twenty paragraphs, to a man engaged ... to treat and abuse him like a slave.* The masochist orders someone to dominate him; he expresses his desire by putting it totally into the hands of someone else. In masochism, power is enacted and given up in the one act, and subjectivity is expressed by its thorough and spectacular, fully dramatised abasement. Masochism summarises the double attitude to both power and subjectivity in contemporary culture as it has been delivered to us through the rigours of modernity and their long unfinished disestablishment. Masochism, then, summarises, even emblematises, our ambiguity. To return, then, to the main argument of this paper, how are we to talk about it?



Masochism challenges the secret of power by putting it on display but not in order to present power as shame nor in order to ridicule it, but to embrace, love and celebrate it. The deconstruction and the enactment of power are the same here not in a parodic, uneasy or even paradoxical operation but as part of a simple double act. Both the celebration and the critique of power are positive acts here. The logic of the secret whereby a hidden, insidious power is revealed and attacked does not bind masochistic double play even though it may be claimed to trigger it.

As we recall, Califia has flattened this doubleness out, representing it in terms of a logic of secrecy and revelation. Perniola shows the limitations of the logic of the secret in *Enigmas: The Egyptian Moment in Society and Art*, in an analysis of Guy Debord's late work *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. Debord had argued that the transparent society of the spectacle had given way to an obscurantist "impenetrable and incomprehensible" society.⁸ To Perniola, this implies a model of a truth that is self-contained, objective, and completely independent of thought, one in which "thinking is presented in terms of a police investigation,"⁹ hunting down the truth, exposing it and hauling it before the tribunal of a full, unambiguous and blinding light.

Implied in the idea of the secret is the notion that someone knows the truth and is manipulating it for advantage. Someone "possesses the secret and knows how to

maintain a total mastery over its management.”¹⁰ The counter-action, whereby someone who does not possess the secret reveals it anyway, takes hold of it and holds it up for shame, would leave the logic of secrecy and revelation totally intact. The person who reveals the secret they do not possess does not undermine the logic of the secret but merely challenges who owns it: me or you. In a political context, the revelation is an act of radical democracy and this is why we are enthusiastic about it in principle. Everyone should own the secret. Yet the revelation of a secret like the one Califia claims does not leave the “truth” that is revealed unaffected. It completely re-configures the nature of power. It does not merely reform our relationship with it as secret. It makes a cruel, dishonest power we loathe and suspect, and which divides people from their desire and from one another, into an object of delight and a source of intimacy. What is being re-drawn is not our relationship with the secret but our relationship with power itself: the power which masochism stages is a different power altogether. It is not a power that requires to be hidden and that thus manipulates the contrast between appearance and reality. The power Califia wants to argue that masochism critiques is a power which denies itself, which claims to be accountable, properly constituted and responsible, but which is, in fact, one-sided, cynical and self-interested. Yet this same power, as an object of celebration, is a means of love. How can we describe a power that is both these things: both oppressive and liberating, both hateful and loving? Masochistic play critiques and celebrates power in the one act and is thus neither simply complacent about power nor collaborative with it, nor is it simply negative about it.

The trope Perniola proposes for this kind of un-secret yet strikingly un-simple situation is the *enigma*. What characterises the enigma is the co-organisation of radically different and incompatible, even incommensurate, events in simultaneity and co-ordination with one another, *and always on the surface*: “opposing forces do not succeed one another chronologically, but are held simultaneously present in the same object.”¹¹ He goes on:

enigma is the coincidence of antagonists, the concatenation of opposites, the contact of things that are divergent, and even the antagonism of things that coincide, the opposition of the concatenated, and the divergence of things that are in contact with one another.¹²

The enigma does not conceal its truth in the way the secret does but displays its complex nature, enacting it in a representation. It “neither utters nor hides its meaning, but shows it by a sign.”¹³ The masochistic scene is such a sign, in which power does not simply reveal itself but embraces itself over and above its function as tool. In this act, power is enthralling, cruel, desirable, lovely and horrible, all at the same time.

In a society of the enigma, then, the relationship to power is not one in which power can be simply anathematised as the hidden manipulations of a cabal. Power is not something simply to detect in its secret hiding-place and then subject to suspicion. It injures bodies and even threatens lives, but, at the same time, it is an object of art, entertainment and fantasy. In this fantasy, we bring forth our sense of possibility and an open-ended enrichment of our freedom. Our play with it has consequences we cannot foresee and do not understand either for our subjectivity or for the increasingly complex power relations of the many societies to which we each belong. These power relations are themselves increasingly uncertain and open-ended. In short, they are enigmatic. Masochism does not reveal nor discover these arrangements as much as it

enacts them. To reveal the secret of power implies that this power is simple and knowable and can be shown in its truth, according to the same logic by which the criminal is brought to light. Masochism is not like this. It is a thinking of power not for the purposes of liberation but to stage for us its entanglement and ambiguity.

How does Perniola's thinking of the enigma help us with the issue of freedom, with which we started? Masochism presents freedom as neither an achievable ideal nor bankable goal, but as something that is only meaningful and that can only be articulated in relation to captivity. Freedom without captivity is meaningless and empty. The staging of freedom also involves the staging of captivity to the masochist. In fact, is there any other kind of freedom than that which is evoked as the horizon and limit of captivity and that is realisable or visible only in that particular context? Freedom as a state is meaningless. The term is only evoked to describe a situation in which it is deemed to be restricted or threatened. The word itself refers implicitly to the containment it challenges. There can be no freedom without the trace of captivity. In this way, freedom only emerges in concert with its putative opposite and only makes sense while that opposite endures. Masochism enacts how the way to freedom will never leave captivity behind. This is true for the case Krafft-Ebing cites as much as it is for Califia, who acts out freedom from power by copying power's captivity. Freedom, then, must be an enigma, because it requires unfreedom, but not simply as something to pass through and overcome, but as a permanent accompaniment.

This idea that freedom can never be pure nor unconnected to unfreedom has telling consequences for a complex and plural yet increasingly orthodox contemporary cultural politics, which sees action to be most effective at the level not of the collective distribution of power but at that of representation, regulation and subjectivity. The liberation offered here will always be tinged with ambiguity, irresolution and incompleteness. A freedom that can only be enacted – or perhaps even plausibly appear – at the level of subjectivity, yet that cannot be registered, except to be celebrated, in the politics of the common sphere, will always seem problematic, if not, at one level, always a defeat. This is not to diminish the idea of freedom as an experiment in selfhood. Yet whatever may be claimed as freedom here will always appear irreducibly complicated, partially glimpsed and never fully realisable.



Derrida's trope of "autoimmunity" provides an alternative and more intense way of thinking about masochism. An autoimmune process is one where "a living being in quasi-*suicidal* fashion 'itself' works to destroy its own protection, to immunise itself *against* its 'own' immunity."¹⁴ Derrida provides some examples of autoimmunity in his discussion of the 11 September 2001 attacks and the war on terror: the fact that Osama bin Laden was originally armed and encouraged by the USA itself,¹⁵ or that the "war on terror" might well end by provoking a reaction that will only strengthen terrorism.¹⁶ Some of these examples might now appear platitudinous. Derrida was only speaking within weeks of the attacks and historical events have done much to vindicate his comments.

How could we use the trope of autoimmunity to re-think the issues of power and freedom that masochism has provoked for us? The masochistic experiment with power viewed through the lens of autoimmunity shows that that which gives rise to power (the masochist's desire, for example) is simultaneously an abnegation of it. Masochism then deploys power *while bringing it into question*. It is a form of the operation of power in which power is specified and fetishised. Power is not merely an

instrument of organisation but a means of different kinds of pleasure from the libidinal to the aesthetic, and the endurance of power becomes more than sufferance. Power is still to be attended to but in ways that present it as artificial and thus potentially hold it up for ridicule and re-making. It is power put at risk by being extended into and encouraging the forms of behaviour (the freedom of expression of playful desire, for example) it should most be able to intimidate.

Yet in this analysis, even deconstruction of power is only possible as a willed enactment of power. Power produces the questioning of itself as its fulfilment. The power of the masochist to organise power is a power in excess of itself, but this excessive power is always played out as (the masochist's own staged) powerlessness. Power as powerlessness is a power both in thrall to and as a threat to itself. This process is comparable to what Califia claims in that the staging of power threatens it, but without the putative moral heroism of the drama of the revelation of the "secret." In this, autoimmunity is not unlike the enigma. Where the secret works according to a model of deceptive surface and hidden truth, both the enigma and the autoimmune see the operation of power not in its secret depths but in its complex extent. Here, masochism dramatises not power's dirty secret but its elaborate complexity. What distinguishes the autoimmune from the enigma is that instead of seeing power as poised in its intrinsic and paradoxical doubleness, and thus as much aesthetically fascinating as politically challenging, autoimmunity sees power as turned on itself, unstable and dangerous in the way it is always destroying itself. With the autoimmune, the doubleness of power is not merely original and curious, but dramatic and self-threatening.

In masochism, this instability is played out in the way the challenge to power displays how the abnegation of power itself provokes power. The masochistic act of self-abasement and the embracing of the role of the slave is itself an act of power, indeed a greater act of power than the dominance it structures and licences. The man who sends the twenty paragraphs of written instructions is more powerful than the one who actually enacts the power in the masochistic scene. Dissent, then, is never merely complaining about power, while leaving it as the prerogative of someone else, structured authority, regimes of power/knowledge or consensuses of terrorism that are power's regular locus. Dissent can never simply leave power in the hands of others. Dissent must be itself a positive act of power, whether we like it or not, and must, like the masochist, *make love to power*, if it is ever to achieve anything. The masochist shows that power is itself disposable, but also that the abnegation of it, even its critique, is itself an act of power. Masochism is not a model of a legitimate power ceded from below. It cannot be used to argue that the powerless license and even structure power, but that power is itself always in question even in the most elementary ways in which it is instituted.

There are consequences of this thinking of autoimmunity for freedom as well. What the autoimmune reading of the masochistic scene shows is that freedom not only always takes place in the context of and in relation to that which limits it (as we have seen with Perniola) but positively enacts and structures that which restricts and refuses it. The masochist can only enact his freedom by attacking it. Thus squeezed, freedom only becomes meaningful by way of its restriction and only becomes possible, even credible, when withheld. It only exists by being taken away. The restrictions placed on civic freedoms by the war on terror, therefore, or by the various other social wars governments and popular culture have seduced and bullied us into accepting, do not have a paradoxical or deceptive relationship with freedom. Wars for freedom that restrict freedom are not mere hypocrisy. They enact the fact that to us

freedom is an idea – or even just an image – that is most fully promoted by being taken away. Our cult of freedom is one where we shout loud for certain tokens or images of autonomy, while tacitly accepting, overlooking, even loving the strictures of, for example, biopower. In certain contexts – often sexual or political (censorship of certain kinds of representation, the intimidation of certain sexual sub-cultures, the silencing of certain ethnic, religious or community groups deemed too noisy) – increased constraint is routinely demanded to strengthen a mainstream, normative or majority freedom (from otherness understood simply as an annoyance), where freedom is reduced to merely an image, notion or “feeling.” This insight cannot be used to license the reduction of our freedoms, but should lead to a re-thinking of what freedom is for us. Now, like democracy and human rights, freedom has become mindlessly iconic, sewn up behind a wall of unaccountable political holiness that needs to be thoroughly interrogated. What masochism shows is that the restrictions on freedom we either embrace, concede or question are the very essence of freedom.



What do the enigma and autoimmunity offer us politically? Perniola argues that the enigma provides a model of a subjective orientation to politics. In this case, this politics is a Stoic one in which a subject is imagined to be capable of addressing or at least being prepared to deal with the complex operation of power. Extrapolating from the work of the seventeenth-century Spanish thinker Baltasar Gracian, Perniola characterises action informed by the enigma as a poised awareness charged with a subtle judgement alert to the opportunity for the most appropriate action:

The lesson that Gracian imparted is that whoever wishes to act victoriously must know how to wait for circumstances that favour their own action. The key to enigmatic action is therefore *detención*, deferment, stock-taking, delay. It follows that the true person of action seldom acts.¹⁷

This action is neither impatient nor histrionic, nor is it ideological. It is motivated not by broad and resolved truth but by an appropriate engagement with “the world’s latest winning or successful trend.”¹⁸

In the case of autoimmunity, the situation is more complex, and more fluid, demonstrating that the Derridean model of power confronts power in its instability and mutability. Autoimmune movements “produce, invent and feed the very monstrosity they claim to overcome”:¹⁹ the masochist’s exercise of power requires powerlessness as the means of staging the power over which it has power. Freedom cannot make sense without staging unfreedom. This is consistent with the logic most commonly articulated in Derrida’s late work: that which makes something possible always exceeds and defies it, allowing it in the first place, but always threatening it. There are many examples of this: the notion of justice that makes law possible, but that always shows law to be a failure in “Force of Law”; the gift that sets the economy in motion but that constantly subverts its circularity and closure in *Given Time*; the unconditional hospitality that motivates every act of actual hospitality, while being itself the unreal perhaps even dangerous asymptote of all acts of welcoming in *Of Hospitality*; the unconditionality of sovereignty in *Rogues* that licenses the institution of political authority while also offering the promise of challenging that authority. In short, no identity can emerge except in relation to an excess that both makes it possible and threatens to ruin it. Justice provides the aspiration that makes the law

necessary, while at the same time, law will never fulfil what justice requires. It will never reach that ever-receding horizon. This is what led Derrida to say in “Force of Law” that “deconstruction is justice,”²⁰ the undeconstructible, that which will always be in excess of any particular instantiation, indeed of ontology itself.

Yet this excess is not something alien to or distant from the things it gives rise to. It inhabits them and structures them. Law is not an entity with a simple existence that aspires towards something else, justice. Law could not come into existence in the first place without the call-to-justice. It would have no meaning without this excess that threatens to undo its meaning. Justice is merely the impulse to self-overcoming in law. Justice, then, is inalienable from law.

It is this complexity that the masochistic scene dramatises in relation to power and freedom. The very questioning of power inhabits power as part of its necessary constitution. There is no power without dissent from power, and dissent from power must itself be an act of power. Similarly, unfreedom constitutes freedom, and there is no possibility of the construction or extension of freedom that does not at the same time require the intensification or elaboration of unfreedom. These autoimmune “movements,”²¹ as Derrida calls them, propose to us the very complexity of the political situation in which we find ourselves: no act of political resistance can avoid being itself a deployment of power; no struggle for freedom can avoid being also a threat to freedom. It is these complex situations that have done so much to paralyse dissent in recent years, because those adopting a radical critical political agenda have seen their most simple motivation as opposition to the exercise of brute force and to any restriction of freedom. Yet however insistent the rhetoric of dissent might be, however much it might seek to *demonstrate* against power and unfreedom, this quietism fails unless it seeks in some way to exercise power itself. What the masochistic scene offers is a sense of power requiring to be questioned, but only in and through another act of power. There is no withdrawal from power. Even quietism exercises a power that it will not avow and that it simply refuses to seize at the right moment. Power and unfreedom become images of horror: no sense of a positive power or a beautiful restraint is possible – these things are considered unacceptably “conservative” – and the celebration of power becomes mere recreation.

The insight that masochism offers encourages the will to political progress and menaces it simultaneously. Masochism is an aesthetic event and not a political programme. It is not even a coherent political statement. Arguments like Califia’s that want to present it as an exemplary liberatory manifestation succumb to the postmodern cult of the most radical gesture, which sees the most extravagant indictment of power as somehow magically productive, and thus able to overcome its own retrogressive dimension, especially if there is desire involved. It is salutary to recognise that the only way to critique power is to exercise power. We must realise that our critique of power is always already *almost* a celebration of power, and will be most effective, indeed most worthwhile and meaningful, when it commits to power as its own necessary consequence and radical enthusiasm. It is also an important insight into the post-Enlightenment cult of freedom to see that the pursuit of freedom necessarily intensifies captivity. Masochism then teaches us to love power a little better, and to distrust freedom, in any guise, a bit more. An autoimmune reading of masochism extends Perniola’s insight into the enigmatic nature of contemporary culture. It is an offer to be taken up, over and above our automatic anathematisation of power and our vacuous and unproductive, yet endlessly repeated, tributes to freedom.

In some ways, then, Califia is right. S/M is an index to our culture of power. S/M should not be dismissed as a curious and marginal lifestyle, a titillating resource

for pop culture or advertising imagery, nor an almost (if sniggeringly) acknowledged mainstream sexual game. The contemporary culture of power is one where values and ideals are reduced from meaningful goals to merely formal rhetorical constructs, and where implication and innocence, careless guilt and ignorant privacy, ruthless exploitation and naïve consumerism, in short, agency and passivity, are not clearly distinguished from one another. The complex way in which power is structured, executed and disavowed needs to be understood if we are to analyse its future and exercise our responsibility.

notes

1 Krafft-Ebing 170. This is yet another example of the role of the formal contract in masochism, something recurrent in masochistic texts from Leopold von Sacher-Masoch to Elfride Jelinek. Deleuze discusses the role of the contract in masochism in “Coldness and Cruelty.”

2 It is important to recognise that slavery in Moll’s case is imaginary, and thus cannot be too quickly or loosely identified with literal slavery. Yet its role as part of the West’s slave-imaginary does supply it with an historical/political function. It would be worthwhile to investigate how fantasies of slavery (erotic, orientalist or other) have either obstructed or encouraged campaigns against slavery. The idea that fantasies of slavery might help fight slavery seems counter-intuitive. However, since fantasies of powerlessness must stage a certain irreducible ownership of power, slave-play puts power at issue in ways that must be desperately resisted by literal economies of slavery.

3 Califia 165.

4 There are, of course, significant differences between masochism and S/M, and the two cannot be simply conflated. The purely masochistic contract subordinates the putatively dominant to the submissive’s designs. In S/M, on the other hand, a more complex and bilateral organisation of power takes place. Yet, whatever their specific configuration of power, they both can be understood as re-staging versions of social power. My aim is to analyse the general relationship between power in the scene and social power, regardless of the specific denomination of power being staged.

5 Califia 166.

6 Ibid. 159.

7 Foucault 46.

8 Perniola 4.

9 Ibid. 4.

10 Ibid. 10.

11 Ibid. 17.

12 Ibid. 18.

13 Ibid. 17.

14 Borradori 94.

15 Ibid. 95.

16 Ibid. 99.

17 Perniola 21.

18 Ibid.

19 Borradori 99.

20 Derrida 228–98.

21 Borradori 99.

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