

## Dickinson and the Masochistic Aesthetic

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Dickinson scholars have often been intrigued by the poet's acute sensitivity to relations of domination and submission. <sup>1</sup> But while Gary Lee Stonum has rightly observed that the poet "tends to measure all conceivably bipolar phenomena for their resemblance to the structure of mastery" (18), Camille Paglia's provocative thesis that Dickinson was a "sodomasochistic imaginist" (629) and even a "female Sade" (624) has -- although perhaps not surprisingly, given Paglia's tendency to excess and predilection for sentialism -- found few critical supporters. Dare one ask then, contrarily, if Dickinson's poetic explorations of the structure of mastery align her, in any way, with masochism? Or is the very positing of the question in a scholarly context itself a curious masochistic gesture of sorts? Perhaps not, when we consider that in recent years the rethinking of masochistic subjectivity through the psychoanalytic model of fantasy has become an important project for contemporary literary criticism precisely because this model demonstrates how the perversion may assume an *oppositional* relation to an experience of oppression. <sup>2</sup> Laplanche and Pontalis argue that fantasy is a space or setting in which gendered identity breaks down, in which the subject is elided into the syntax of the scenario, in which no subject position is ever stable or essential. They define the fantasmic as a "*mise-en-scène* of desire" and "a script . . . capable of dramatization" (318). Fantasy scenarios are specifically constructed in order to permit multiple and shifting identifications. <sup>3</sup> One may extrapolate from this that the fantasy scenario that is the literary text offers a convenient setting from within which gendered identity might be restructured. Thus, a literary text apparently invested in masochism may conceivably subvert the masochistic positioning of the female subject by refusing hermeneutic possession and exploiting masochistic pleasure; that is, pleasure in the loss of a stable identity. Further, by employing techniques of reversal to expose and dramatize power relations, and by enacting those reversals within particular locations, at **[End Page 1]** textual sites where domination and submission are produced and inscribed, a writer may effectively manipulate and subvert a conventional power paradigm. Moreover, by appealing to masochism, to pleasure in loss, such a writer would not only problematize the strict gendering of the sadomasochistic dynamic but also reveal the subversive potential within masochism itself. With the emphasis shifted from sadistic possession to masochistic loss, the reading process itself would become a means of decentering rather than of stabilizing identity. In short, re-presenting female masochism potentially disturbs the gendered polarities of dominance and submission on a number of different levels of textual representation. It is my contention that Dickinson, who viewed masochistic fantasy's identification of the role of power in pleasure as not so much the manifestation of female "false consciousness" but as a stark realism, and who was, as a writer, intensely aware of the crucial role of power in sex, gender, and sexual representations, does just that: she develops a subversive *masochistic aesthetic* that, by staging the thematics of domination and submission within a text, works against and undoes power hierarchies, showing how they, like sexual identity itself, are fragile and fluid entities. In creating these *tableaux vivants*, Dickinson succinctly demonstrates how masochistic fantasy, by eluding the usual constraints on power and pleasure, can create a representative space, a *mise-en-scène* of desire, from within which poet and readers alike are able to explore and demystify the

brutal conjunction of power and pleasure in intersubjective relations.

Indisputably, Dickinson's readers frequently confront a female speaker whose narrative emphasizes her own passivity, weakness and insignificance. That speaker is locationally dwarfed by her proximity to the powerful presence of a superior masculine force. When that force is personified and addressed as God, Lover, Father, King, Emperor, Lord or Master, the speaker's relative powerlessness defines the relationship. Within such a system of established hierarchy, the speaker often characterizes herself as the tiny Daisy juxtaposed to the "Immortal Alps" (#124) and the "Himmaleh" (#481) or unflatteringly paired with the "Great Caesar!" (#102) who is "Her Lord" (#339).<sup>4</sup> Clark Griffith observes that the lover-figure of the poems frequently "arrives on the scene to alarm as well as to delight; his actions threaten even as they gratify, and the possibilities he extends are always somehow double-edged" (164). The possibilities are double-edged presumably insofar as they are striated by potential threat and the imminence of probable subordination and tintured with hints of ecstatic masochism -- "Most - I love the Cause that slew Me." (#925). This self-impelled subordination climaxes in poetic sentiments like

**[End Page 2]**

'Twas my One Glory -  
Let it be  
Remembered  
I was owned of Thee -

(#1028)

or in the excruciating plaintiveness of "Sang from the Heart, Sire" (#1059) in which the bird-like speaker actually dips her beak in her own blood to sing her master's praises.

Given these painful sentiments, the so-called "Master" letters become especially troubling texts for scholars, documenting as they do the poet's difficult relationship with a powerful, distant male figure. These letters, fueled and motivated by the desire somehow to procure recognition from this rejecting other, exude dependency. Moreover, they detail a biographical relation, whether real or imagined, in which the writer's own pleasure seems contingent on, and inextricably connected to, suffering, humiliation and physical pain:

If you saw a bullet hit a Bird - and he told you he was'nt shot - you might weep at his courtesy, but you would certainly doubt his word.

One drop more from the gash that stains your Daisy's bosom - then would you *believe?*  
(L233)

Oh, did I offend it - [Did'nt it want me to tell it the truth] Daisy - Daisy - offend it - who bends her smaller life to his (it's) meeker (lower) every day - who only asks - a task - [who] something to do for love of it - some little way she cannot guess to make that master glad -

A love so big it scares her, rushing among her small heart - pushing aside the blood and leaving her faint (all) and white in the gust's arm -

Low at the knee that bore her once unto [royal] wordless rest [now] Daisy [stoops a] kneels a culprit - tell her her [offence] fault - Master - if it is [not so] small eno' to cancel with her life, [Daisy] she is satisfied - but punish [do not] dont banish her - shut her in prison, Sir - only pledge that you will forgive - sometime - before the grave, and Daisy will

not mind. (L248) **[End Page 3]**

This epistolary relationship was thoroughly perverse, and perhaps revelatory to the extent that it was perverse. <sup>5</sup> Dickinson, who could not tolerate erotic love, with that necessary proximity that puts the self too much at risk, appears here to gravitate toward a sexual perversion, a radical technique for experiencing sexual excitement while avoiding the threatening uncertainties of sexual intimacy. (Sexuality, we should recall, is not originally an exchange of intensities between passionate individuals, but rather, with the realization that our identity as a subject is constituted by our relations of difference and similarity to others, a condition of broken negotiations with a dispassionate world). Perversions circumscribe sexuality through strategies of control, such as reducing oneself or one's partner to a cipher to be dominated, subordinated, observed, overpowered, hurt. Perversions also burlesque sexual love: characterized by obsessive struggles for control and themes of domination and submission, they foreground the cultural entangling of power and intimacy. But to showcase and even mimic the desire for power and powerlessness evident in a social order shot through with controls may be, paradoxically, to rebel against that cultural hegemony, undermining the mechanisms of power by making them visible. Or as Dickinson herself would observe: "The small can crush the great, however, only temporarily" (L357). Given that, at least in the Master letters, Dickinson does not refute a contemporary image of powerless femininity (well she knew that

Power is a familiar growth -  
Not distant - not to be -  
Beside us like a bland Abyss -  
In every company -

[#1238])

but personally internalizes and textually italicizes it, more thorough analyses of the poet's masochistic tendencies are surely in order, not least because such studies may facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the more pervasive gendering of power in antebellum America.

This essay, though, has decidedly more limited ambitions. I will merely submit that in her poetry and letters Dickinson creates a vivid imaginative world adhering rigidly to the dictates of the masochistic art of fantasy and the psychodynamics of the perversion. Of course, this may be in itself a delicate observation, and an equally uncomfortable insight for protective critical readers. Typically, the fantasies of the female masochist are assumed to be the result of an unconscious internalization of social powerlessness, while her **[End Page 4]** pleasures appear to run contrary to feminist goals of equality and autonomy. The textual representation of female masochism is similarly suspect; the fact that the female sexual imagination is often already situated in a sadomasochistic eroticization of power -- witness the example of popular masochistic-erotic "female" romance fiction <sup>6</sup> -- further evidence of the extent to which masochism is an accepted norm for female behavior under patriarchy. Kaja Silverman pointedly observes that "the difficulty with conceptualizing that psychic condition [female masochism] as in any way potentially deviant or perverse is that it represents such a logical extension of those desires that are

assumed to be 'natural' for the female subject. Because there is so little cultural resistance to it, it does not generally assume any of the poetic or narrative complexity of pathological male masochism, nor manifest as marked a heterocosmic impulse" (59). Thus, although masochism is a centrally structuring element of both male and female subjectivity, it is only in the former case that the phenomenon can be safely acknowledged since it is *already* a requisite element of "normal" female subjectivity, providing a key mechanism for eroticizing lack and subordination. 7

But although desires for experiences of control and subordination are often cruelly manifested in sexual relations, these desires obviously transcend the realm of sexuality *per se*. The assumption that the pervasiveness of female masochistic fantasies is a mere consequence of women's cultural degradation oversimplifies a more complex interaction of social and psychological processes. Since power dynamics between self and other pervade every aspect of our culture, masochism reflects deeply embedded aspects of social as well as psychic experience. Kaja Silverman observes that the masochist "only acts out in an exaggerated, anthropomorphic and hence disruptive way the process whereby subjects are culturally spoken" (55). The female masochistic subject thus potentially burlesques the interpellation of femininity and embodies its contradictions. Jessica Benjamin suggests that within masochistic fantasies "we can discern the 'pure culture' of domination -- a dynamic which organizes both domination and submission" (52), a sentiment echoed by Michel Foucault's assertion that sexual perversions are revelatory not because they say "no" to social power striations but because they are "drawn out, revealed, isolated, intensified, incorporated, by multifarious power devices" (47-8). Culturally defined sexual "perversions" such as masochism, erotic transgressions which create the boundaries they traverse, provide a useful arena for the close observation of the mechanism of those power devices, if not always for their dissolution. 8 Given the performative contouring of the perversion, ignoring the masochistic aesthetic that *informs* so much of Dickinson's text constitutes nothing less than a significant elision of her subversiveness. **[End Page 5]**

It is useful to preface the analysis of the particular stylistic components of Dickinson's masochistic aesthetic with a few more general comments on the psychodynamics of masochism. Freud deals with the question of masochism (both its etiology and structure) in a number of essays, but never to his ultimate satisfaction. Initially, he describes sadism and masochism as paired components of a sexual instinct that could take either an active or passive form. Sadism was the primary instinctual aim and presumed to be a derivative of biologically driven aggression and the instinct to survive: Masochism was an inversion, a sadism turned inward, the result of a switch in the object of the drive from the external world to the actual subject, with sexual excitement now associated with pain and humiliation. Initially, therefore, both sadism and masochism originate as pre-genital, pre-oedipal phenomena reflective of an often wayward, biologically contoured aggressive instinct. This interpretation is significantly revised in Freud's later investigation of the origins of the perversion in "A Child Is Being Beaten" where he speculates that masochism is a result of the child's unconscious guilt about oedipal feelings and that the repression of those feelings is the underlying cause of the association established in the child's mind between sexual gratification and pain. In his early speculative writings, Freud is primarily concerned with masochism as a perversion in which sexual pleasure is

attached to pain and satisfaction linked to the suffering or humiliation undergone by the subject. But the evolution in his thought on the subject takes him considerably beyond the perversion detailed by sexologists. By his 1924 essay, "The Economic Problem of Masochism," Freud had become concerned with problems of masochism in which humiliation and suffering are sought as part of character formation and enacted in spheres other than the sexual. <sup>9</sup> Given the complex evolution of his thought on the matter, it is hardly surprising that Freud would refer to masochism as a powerful source of analytic resistance. The major resistance that masochism continually enacted was its apparent incompatibility with Oedipal theory.

Gilles Deleuze suggests, in opposition to the Freudian paradigm, that students of masochism take a literary approach to the subject since the original definition of masochism comes itself from literature: "the clinical specificities of . . . masochism are not separable from the literary values peculiar to . . . Masoch." Deleuze argues in favor of a "genuinely formal, almost deductive psychoanalysis which would attend first of all to the formal patterns underlying [masochism] viewed as formal elements of fictional art" (65). <sup>10</sup> The masochistic disposition toward literature and theatrical performance signifies neither a pallid escapism nor a continued reliance on the hackneyed conventions established by Sacher-Masoch. Rather, the aesthetic realm provides an **[End Page 6]** especially amenable location for the presentation (and representation) of the fundamentally shattered subjectivity sought by the masochist. In this context, the masochist's reliance on literary structures is the result of a need to "displace the logical impossibilities and contradictions of the subject's designs for itself in masochism into a domain traditionally hospitable to paradox and impossibility, the aesthetic" (Mansfield, 3). As Gaylyn Studlar observes, Deleuze's view of masochism as a phenomenology of experience pushes its definition far beyond mere perverse sexuality:

[T]he masochistic aesthetic extends beyond the purely clinical realm into the arena of language, artistic form, narrativity, and production of textual pleasure. Emerging as a distinct artistic discourse, the masochistic aesthetic structures unconscious infantile sexual conflicts, conscious fantasies, and adult experience into a form that is not only a measure of the influence of early developmental stages but also a register of the transformative power of the creative process. (14)

Deleuze lodges a significant challenge to Freud's assertion that masochism is an expression of Oedipal conflicts by relocating the perversion's etiology within the oral stage and thus emphasizing Freud's inadequate investigation of the role of the mother as a powerful, controlling, even threatening presence in psychosexual development. In Deleuzian theory, the masochistic subject is assumed to take the position of the child in a perverse simulacrum of the early parent / child relationship. This radical (re)construction of masochism -- which overlaps with Julia Kristeva's studies of preoedipal sexuality and abjection -- relocates the masochistic subject in the sexual indeterminacy and mobility of representations that characterize the pre-oedipal stages. Masochism's shattering of the strictures of the Oedipal Triangle is a powerful subversion of the "Law of the Father": A desire that finds pleasure in infantile polymorphous sexuality and, paradoxically, in "unpleasure" clearly defies the Oedipal imperialism that validates patriarchal rule. This is why, in Leo Bersani's hyperbolic view, "masochism serves life" as the "psychical strategy which partially defeats a biologically dysfunctional process of maturation" (38-9). In short,

masochism as aesthetic strategy might be considered to have an oblique affinity with utopian *écriture féminine*. The appeal of a theoretical structure in which "femininity is posited as lacking in nothing and placed alongside a virility suspended in disavowal" (Deleuze, 59) for a feminist critique is in fact rather obvious. **[End Page 7]**

In recent years, as a consequence of these Deleuzian speculations, masochism has undergone a theoretical renaissance in literary studies. But while the erotics of submission have been reclaimed by scholars as an emancipatory sexuality for men, the potential subversive application of a masochistic aesthetic for women remains unexplored. This is not necessarily because identifying an aesthetics of masochism in female authors is politically maladroit, although to discuss female masochism in any context is to run the risk of finding oneself unflatteringly aligned with the crude essentialism of Freud, whose notorious identification of a specific *feminine* masochism, the expression of an intrinsic feminine nature, was succinctly sexist in its linkage of passivity, submission, masochism, and femininity. <sup>11</sup> Rather, critical studies that appropriate Deleuze's model inevitably tend to focus on a "liberating" male masochism as a result of the theorist's focus on the fantasizing male subject in Sacher-Masoch. But, aside from the fact that Deleuze also insists that the female can assume the same position as the male in relation to the *oral mother* (59-60), it is surely true that the masochistic subject (male or female) takes the child's submissive position regardless of the assumed gender of the fantastic punishing parent. As Studlar notes: "the pre-Oedipal beginnings of masochism in the oral, that is, pregenital, stage, may mean that sexual difference is unimportant to the perversion's basic dynamics" (16). Adela Pinch observes in her reading of Freud's "A Child is Being Beaten" that since the fantasist could apparently occupy any of three subject positions -- that of the child, that of the person punishing the child, or that of an excited onlooker -- the basic structure of masochistic fantasy assumes a fluidity of gender positioning. What we discover in Freud's essay is that

[T]he female masochist who enjoys her own pain is, oddly, a girl with the power to redefine her own gender in fantasy. The relationship between the form in which a fantasy is represented and its affective significance is determined by the fantastic nature of sexual difference. "Masochism" is the name for a structure that involves not only an identification with suffering . . . but also an identification across gender boundaries. (848)

While the Freudian assertions that "the nucleus of the unconscious" forces released by masochistic desire "is in each human being that side of him which belongs to the opposite sex" and that "what belongs to the opposite sex is identical with the repressed" ("A Child is Being Beaten," 201-202) are code evidence **[End Page 8]** of a highly transgressive model of identity with regard to gender, the founder of psychoanalysis, perhaps through the exercise of his own defence mechanisms, evades the more radical suggestiveness of his own discovery. <sup>12</sup> Silverman observes in her analysis of masochistic subjectivity that "some very unorthodox desires and patterns of identification can be concealed behind what may often be only a masquerade of submission, including ones which are quite incompatible with a subordinate position. *There may even be occasions in which a woman's masochistic fantasies and sexual practises challenge gender*" (59, emphasis added). While the fact that the exploration of masochistic subjectivity involves exploring and transgressing the line between the real and the phantasmic understandably troubles a pragmatic feminism invested in the politically tangible, it is my contention that representations of female

masochism can be mobilized to subvert and challenge, rather than passively reproduce, a more pervasive social powerlessness; the textualization of masochism, in particular, creating a fantasy space in which, under controlled conditions, the more pervasive powerlessness felt and experienced by women in a patriarchal culture can be explored and the gendered polarities of dominance and submission skewed by parodic exaggeration. When imaginative violence uncovers and demystifies the mechanism of power in a sexual theater -- a dramatic staging of sexuality, if you will -- then masochistic desire approaches its apotheosis: the transformation of suffering into pleasure in a situated and strictly demarcated fantasy space. For convenience sake, let's call that demarcated fantasy space a poem or, better, a poem by Emily Dickinson.

Now clearly, idle speculation about Dickinson's masochistic tendencies, as evidenced by the angry plaintiveness of the Master letters, is rather unproductive, albeit provocatively entertaining. Substantially more useful would be a critical examination of how power dynamics are played out within poems that replicate subject positions assumed in the Master letters. To sketch one obvious example: in "The Daisy follows soft the Sun -" (#106), the pleasure of the poem's narrator (figured as heliotropic Daisy) is derived from the feeling of her own insignificance in relation to the power of the beloved (figured as declining sun). The narrator seeks to seduce the love of this revered and idealized authority by voluntary acquiescence, by submission, by humbling herself. Love is to be bought with suffering. In the masochistic scenes that Dickinson creates in poems such as this one, the everyday power plays of sexuality are made explicitly theatrical, ritualized. But the conscious acting out of the assigned role in the masochistic theater usually proves usefully subversive. Because the paradox of masochistic desire is that while polarities such as subject /object, male /female, active /passive are crucial to its dualistic structure, **[End Page 9]** its discovery of pleasure in pain undoes any and all such established hierarchies. Masochistic desire in action typically demonstrates how the rigid definitions of power roles within a male sexual hegemony can be rendered malleable. Superb feminist critical readings of Poem 106 convincingly demonstrate the flower's covert rhetorical power. <sup>13</sup> Indeed, a process of levelling, exchanges of position and power, which are an integral part of the inter-personal dynamic of masochistic pleasure, are an equally integral component of Dickinson's poetry. Poems such as "I make His Crescent fill or lack -" (#909) clearly question the interpersonal dynamics of dominance. In these texts, the one in control is not all powerful: since the commander needs one who obeys to maintain his command, the ruler is ultimately as enslaved as the ruled. Stonum points out that because Dickinson identifies supremacy with autonomy, she "understands that mastery is not quite a supreme form of power. The various dukes and queens and emperors in her poems all need recognition by their inferiors" (155). And, as Gilbert and Gubar observe of poems which they connect to the "master" myth, for example "My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -" (#754), "master and slave continually trade places" (611). Typically, Dickinson establishes relations of dominance and submission in order to upset, even invert, the terms. Suffering is thus merely the necessary precondition for achieving the pleasure of repositioning. In fact, to quote Deleuze, Dickinson's poetic persona is typically "insolent in [her] obsequiousness, rebellious in [her] submission; in short [she] is a humorist, a logician of consequences" (78).

Dickinson's concern in many of her power contoured poetic explorations is the basic

structure of masochistic desire, whether it be in loves profane or divine. Masochism, the search for recognition of the self by another who alone is powerful enough to bestow that recognition, has obvious affinities with a religious submission to the divine will. For Dickinson, "Thy will be done" is a masochistic credo. If we cannot separate the many vague male figures in her poetry (and why should we even try?) -- the lover or God of those "Wild Nights" (#249) -- that is because for this poet religious ecstasy is merely a sublimated sexuality, spiritualized and magnified by the imagination, and sexual ecstasy the gorgeous perversion of a more profound spiritual longing. And just as masochistic desire conflates the sexual and the spiritual so too does it merge love and self-destruction in a manner positively, well, Dickinsonian. In this interpretive context, a poem such as "Because I could not stop for Death" (#712) becomes one of many perfect expressions of the masochistic death drive in which the Romantic longing for annihilation sublimates desire in a mystical unity with the Other. Offering them the only available liberation from the repetition of **[End Page 10]** desire, Dickinson's narrators do not fear death, they actively court him as kindly escort.

Robert Weisbuch discusses Dickinson's "scenelessness" at productive length. David Porter dubs her, with some justification, the poet of the "aftermath." Hardly coincidentally, I believe, two of the basic components of masochistic narrativity are "episodic, repetitive scenes, and abrupt elision of decisive events" (Studlar, 111). Leo Bersani's quirky observation that in masochism "the perversions of adults . . . become intelligible as the sickness of uncompleted narratives" (32) also acquires a certain resonance in relation to Dickinson's life and poetry. In the masochistic scene, Studlar observes, self-revelation typically comes through role play, through masquerade. Masquerade is the means by which the perversion controls pleasure, by which consummation and gratification are delayed and masochistic suspense formalized. Dickinson's poetic self-presentation was, by her own admission, a lyric masquerade: "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse - it does not mean - me - but a supposed person" (L268). Studlar further observes that the masochist imposes a mystical contemplative quality on the erotic and that, in masochism, we discover the "heightened emotionality of suspended vignettes of suffering. Violence is muted, sexuality diffused, suffering aestheticized into spectacles of disappointment" (20). It is surely no exaggeration to observe that Dickinson's poetic texts frequently aestheticize suffering in precisely such *tableaux vivants*. More significantly, though, masochistic desire depends upon separation to guarantee a pain / pleasure structure, to control desire and, ultimately, to suspend consummation. Since the temporal core of masochism is "the suspension of gratification manifested in games of waiting . . . and masquerades that discreetly delay consummation . . . [T]he masochistic text relies on suggestive description and narrative suspense enacted through games of disguise and tantalizing pursuit implying gratification forever postponed to the future" (Studlar, 21). <sup>14</sup> In the masochistic aesthetic, formal and narrative patterns are thus also *structurally* linked to self-abasement and suspended desire.

The interdigitation of formal and thematic patterns takes us, I would argue, to the very core of Dickinson's poetic. In Letter 93, the young poet memorably meditates on the masochistic desire of female flowers for an overpowering male sun -- the man of noon. Dickinson inquires of Susan Gilbert if she has seen  
. . . Those same sweet flowers at noon with their heads bowed in anguish before the

mighty sun; think you these thirsty blossoms will *now* need naught but - *dew*? No, they will cry for sunlight, and pine for the burning noon, tho' it scorches them, scathes them; they have got through with peace - they know **[End Page 11]** that the man of noon is *mightier* than the morning and their life is henceforth to him. Oh, Susie, it is dangerous, and it is all too dear, these simple trusting spirits, and the spirits mightier, which we cannot resist! It does so rend me, Susie, the thought of it when it comes, that I tremble lest at sometime I, too, am yielded up. Susie, you will forgive me my amatory strain - it has been a very long one, and if this saucy page did not here bind and fetter me, I might have had no end.

In that surprising final transition, from a meditation upon the yielding of the flower to the "mighty sun" (via the thought that "rends") to a further meditation upon the subordination of the writer to the "saucy page" that "binds" and "fettters," the privileging of one system of willed confinement over another, we witness a fusion of the thematic and the formal that may serve to remind us of Deleuze's pointed observation that "Fundamentally masochism is neither material nor moral, but essentially formal" (27). In fact, masochism is an aesthetic structure precisely insofar as power is always a *form* of discipline. In Poem 252, Dickinson observes this:

Power is only Pain -  
Stranded, thro Discipline,  
Till Weights - will hang -  
Give Balm - to Giants -  
And they'll wilt, like Men -  
Give Himmaleh -  
They'll Carry - Him!

While the pun on discipline would no doubt have elicited Foucault's excited approbation, Stonum points out, in what I consider to be a very fine reading of this poem, that the keyword is "stranded" which the following line encourages us to gloss not just as "abandoned" but also as "woven or braided." In Stonum's interpretation, pain would then be "transformed into power by braiding it into the useable strength of a rope or whip" (57). This poem is a poetic meditation on the control of pleasure, the pleasure of control, and the necessary discipline of disciplining. To control pain by braiding or weaving it into a useful power entails keeping pain close at hand, where it can be formally contoured and wielded, in turn, against another, the rudiments of a vibrant whiplash aesthetic. Oh Susie, it is *dangerous* indeed.

This is not to suggest that the Belle of Amherst is a *belle dame sans merci*. But the masochistic aesthetic exemplified by her poetic texts, it should be re-marked, **[End Page 12]** does involve the mutual implication of thematics, poetic form, and ultimately the psychodynamics of reader response. Dickinson's poetics both tells of desire and arouses and makes use of it as the dynamic of signification. <sup>15</sup> While Freud never found an adequate solution to the central paradox of masochism - the question of how an individual could possibly find pleasure in pain - he did speculate: "Perhaps it is the rhythm, the temporal sequence of changes, rises and falls in the quantity of stimulus; we do not know" ("Economic Problem," 160). If a specific masochistic pleasure is to be found in rhythm, in the rise and fall in the quantity of stimulus, in the temporal sequence of

changes, then it is not unlike a reader's cognitive reactions and responses to the dislocations of a poetic text. Abandoning his original economic or quantitative model of excitation, Freud linked masochism to the principle of metrical repetition. In this way, the poetics of (masochistic) desire and the (masochistic) desire of poetics establish a perfect relation. An interesting Freudian speculation to be sure and, at very least, the suggestion of a correspondence between literary and psychic dynamics could lead one to ponder the consequences of the poet's fraying of Watts' traditional hymn meter. More definitely, we observe that simultaneous with the restructuration of the power hierarchy established between the figures in the masochistic relationship within Dickinson's poems, there is also the suggestion of a parallel adjustment of the dynamic between implied reader and narrator, a dynamic that can itself, in this context, be considered a further figure of the masochistic relation. Stonum, again correctly in my estimation, argues that "[r]eading and writing, like most other acts in Dickinson's world, are always vulnerable to some form of a master-slave relation" and that the established "circuit of author and audience is never simply a neutral channel; it is always a power relation and hence always potentially charged with the affects of power" (15). What if the same masochistic desire that shapes thematics informs the act of transmission? What if Dickinson's pseudo-confessional poetry establishes its own masochistic relation, serving both as a poetic contract that authorizes a continuing punishment (and so pleasure) and as the advertisement that secures the necessary partner (because a masochist requires a partner to make humiliation and pain meaningful) for that contractual alliance? That new partner would be an implied reader who, like the masochist's more typical accomplice, is not coerced into the intimate alliance but seduced into a mutually contracted agreement based upon the promise of certain pleasures.

Or perhaps, when we consider the actual experience of reading this poetry, the promise of certain *unpleasures*. Dickinson's poetry foregrounds dislocations that demand abrupt perceptual shifts on the part of its readers and emphasizes **[End Page 13]** the intellectual delight contingent on psychic pain, the paradoxical pleasure available in the sudden arresting of those readers' thoughts and perceptions. Masochism typically relies on a narrative whose organization "is aleatory and paratactic rather than direct and hypotactic, preferring fore-pleasures to end-pleasures, and browsing to discharge" (Silverman 32). The masochist seeks the prolongation of preparatory detail and ritual at the expense of climax or consummation and, consequently, celebrates the virtues of uncertainty, of dilatoriness, of anticipation. Marked by a series of distancing devices -- elision, repetition, scenelessness, disjunction, syntactic doubling -- Dickinson's poetry suspends gratification and prolongs a necessarily unsatisfied desire, thus providing for its readers a thorough education in the condition the poet dubs "Sumptuous destitution." <sup>16</sup> Indeed, the frustration of the reader's desire for resolution or consummation (for Dickinson, consummation is always "the hurry of fools" [L922]) becomes itself, on occasion, the organizing principle of the poetic structure. Therefore, it is not the case that a certain reading pleasure is derived from the representation of pain in Dickinson's poetry. Rather, the reading of her poetry may itself become an experience that is pleasurable painful. <sup>17</sup> The poet's own definition of uncertain longing (or interpretive aporia?) was, after all, thoroughly masochistic, nothing less than "the delicious throe/Of transport thrilled with Fear -" (#1413). There is ample evidence that Dickinson shared with Freud a thoroughly affective conception of the "effects of reading," an understanding

of reading as an experience that can be as painful, or as pleasurable, as bodily sensation: "If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry" (L342a). Pleasure and pain are both experienced as sexual pleasure when they are powerful enough to shatter a certain stability or equilibrium of the self. The pleasurable excitement of sexuality occurs when the body's normal range of sensation is exceeded and when the organization of the self is momentarily shaken by sensations beyond those compatible with psychic organization. Sexuality is precisely that which is intolerable to the structured self. And so, at least according to Dickinson's famously explosive definition, is poetry.

The fluidity of gender boundaries and subject positionings in masochistic fantasy identified by theorists as varied as Freud, Deleuze and Laplanche suggest that the development and refinement of a masochistic aesthetic by a female poet could in fact be a far from reactionary project. The gender displacements that structure the aesthetic -- and the consequent possibility of power inversions, reversions and slippages at every level of textual representation -- in fact create an arena of potential opportunity within the fantastic construction that is the literary text. As Pinch observes, the fantasist's mobile relationship to her own fantasy, her ability to have a fantasy that "looks one **[End Page 14]** way but feels another, is determined by the formal properties of fantasizing itself" and "masochism always involves a response to the formal dimensions of a representation" (Pinch 847). <sup>18</sup> Thus, ultimately, it is not Dickinson herself but rather her poetry which is *perverse*. Perverse in the etymological sense of the word; "turning across" itself, it dislocates spatiotemporal unities and provides a fundamentally different system of aesthetic coherence. The perversions of Dickinson's poetic texts require of the reader a different type of negotiation too, one which foregrounds the actual experience of reading. In *affect*, the masochistic text demands a masochistic reader. The suspension and postponement of resolution by a series of textual estrangements that replicate the perversion's careful management of desire place the emphasis not on pleasure but on the control of pleasure. The same process of leveling, of power redistribution, observed in the masochistic relationship of figures may be reproduced in an act of poetic emission which problematizes established relationships between implied reader and narrator, actual reader and text. This reproduction foregrounds questions of authority and control as they relate to a masochistic scene of reading, a fantasy space of fluid and paraphilic pleasures, erotic anticipations, and painfully personal exposures.

Keeping always in mind, if not in view, that a male theorist's investment "in representing the suffering or masochistic woman [is] neither merely 'sadistic,' nor 'clearly sexual,' but . . . mediated by identifications, ventriloquizations, and a relay of fantasies" (Pinch, 849), I have argued that a study of the formal properties of Dickinson's masochistic aesthetic is an important and far from regressive project: how the female poet uses that aesthetic to restructure and appropriate the dynamics of textual power is surely as vital, if less safe, a subject of critical study as a male poet's masochistic disavowal of that same power. Sketching the perimeters of a possibly appropriate theoretical apparatus for the interrogation of the masochistic fantasy that *informs* her poetry, I hope to see more detailed investigations of Dickinson's masochistic aesthetic, other fantastically close readings of her erotic formalism. <sup>19</sup> These studies should serve as a necessary corrective, if not to my own preliminary reflections, then to the excesses of recent scholarship on the poet. For as so many Dickinson scholars engage in a flight from history and sexuality

(and, more *strikingly*, from the history of sexuality) in order to fetishize fascicle manuscripts, to pursue somatic contact with documents the poet fingered, to pilgrimage to Harvard and Amherst to touch the relics, to ponder lost and irrecoverable intentions in new hypertextual scriptures, it may be a more than opportune moment to ask pointedly what makes of this particular poet, at this particular critical juncture, a consummate saint or martyr. 20 No less, I suspect, **[End Page 15]** than an auspicious masochistic demeanor, and an inviting and vulnerable textual *corpus* upon which power can be, has been, and is now being, so perversely and violently deployed.

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## Notes

**1. Adrienne Rich, Joanne Feit Diehl, Albert Gelpi and Joanne Dobson have variously asserted that the hierarchical relationship between Dickinson's poetic narrators and a variety of male others does not express or examine a relationship between individuals but instead meditates in quintessentially romantic fashion on the relationship between the poet and her creative imagination. Rich makes the case in "Vesuvius at Home: the Power of Emily Dickinson" that the male other is Dickinson's figuration of her poetic imagination; Diehl uses Bloomian theory in *Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination* to reinterpret the figure as a composite precursor-muse; Gelpi and Dobson develop the idea that the figure is a male archetype or Jungian animus in their essays "Emily Dickinson and the Deerslayer: the Dilemma of the Woman Poet in America," *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Woman Poets*, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 122-34; and "'Oh, Susie, it is dangerous': Emily Dickinson and the Archetype," *Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson*, 80.**

**2. To argue for the subversive potential of female masochistic fantasy is of course to stand accused of being blinded to reality by the blinkers of critical fashion. Catharine MacKinnon memorably castigates Foucauldian analyses of sexuality that proffer the possibility that "hierarchy is equality and slavery is freedom, maxims that everywhere but sex are recognized as an Orwellian mind-fuck but pass in this area as profundity and daring" (118). For MacKinnon, the fact that "the sexualization of aggression or the eroticization of power and the fusion of that with gender such that the one who is the target or object of sexuality is the subordinate, is a female, effeminized if a man" (123) is all too easily overlooked in contemporary studies of sexuality: in actuality, she declares, the eroticization of relations of domination can only, and always, perpetuate male cultural supremacy. MacKinnon is, I think, quite mistaken.**

**3. Numerous Dickinson poems establish just such systems of hierarchy. See for example the following poems: #2, 31, 32, 61, 70, 85, 96, 103, 106, 114, 124, 151, 152, 162, 186, 190, 211, 223, 232, 235, 236, 246, 247, 251, 256, 271, 273, 275, 279, 284, 299, 315, 336, 339, 400, 429, 454, 462, 480, 506, 520, 603, 616, 630, 638, 667, 732, 738, 754, 921, 1053, 1059, 1290, 1339.**

**4. According to Laplanche and Pontalis's definition, perversion is present "where the orgasm is subordinated absolutely to certain extrinsic conditions, which may even be sufficient in themselves to bring about sexual pleasure . . . In a more comprehensive sense, "perversion" connotes the whole of the psychosexual behaviour that accompanies such atypical means of obtaining sexual pleasure" (306).**

**5. See Hazen and Snitow on this popular literary form.**

**6. Luce Irigaray emphasizes that in a patriarchal society a woman's pleasure is *always* "a masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own" (25).**

**7. Fantasy is perhaps best defined as the psychical process of remaking in which identity is pressured and destabilized and reconstructed through such processes as reversal, substitution, projection, and negation. Masochism, it is now speculated, lies at the core of fantasy. Laplanche argues that "fantasy, the introjection of an object, is a perturbation and, in its essence (whether its 'content' be pleasant or unpleasant), a generator of autoerotic excitation . . . [T]he fantasy is the first psychical pain and is thus intimately related, in its origin, to the emergence of the masochistic sexual drive" (88, 97). Freud hypothesizes that aggression directed against the self is the originary form of aggression: Laplanche hypothesizes that masochism only emerges as a sexual drive when aggression directed towards an object is turned inward upon the self. For Laplanche, the movement of internalization detailed by Freud turns aggression into sexual fantasy and, in that inward movement, aggression becomes inextricably linked to sexuality. As he elaborates, "To fantasize aggression is to turn it round upon oneself, to aggress oneself; such is the moment of autoeroticism in which the indissoluble bond between fantasy as such, sexuality, and the unconscious is confirmed . . . If we press that idea to its necessary conclusion, we are led to emphasize the privileged character of masochism in human sexuality" (102). Sexuality and the unconscious are constituted by an act of fantasmaticization, emerging from an act of representation that is nothing less than a masochistic gesture. For Laplanche, "masochism" ultimately signifies not so much a perversion as a significant psychic structure that determines virtually all the subject's relations with others.**

**8. The fantasy is defined as "a sequence in which the subject has his own**

part to play and in which permutations of roles and attributions are possible" and which may well facilitate "the most primitive of defense processes, such as turning round upon the subject's own self, reversal into the opposite, negation and projection" (Laplanche and Pontalis, 318).

**9.** Freud now hypothesized that masochism was "beyond the pleasure principle," a consequence of the repetition compulsion, a component of the death instinct and (reversing his earlier speculation) that masochism -- and not sadism -- was in fact the primary instinct. Pleasure was no longer equated with quantitative reduction of stimulus-induced tension but arose from qualitative changes in the rhythm and sequences of the expression of libidinal drives.

**10.** The fact that masochists typically refer to their staged dramas of subjection as "games" or "scenes" is evidence of their obvious continued dependance on various aesthetic and literary constructions. Mansfield's observation that "everywhere we look in masochism -- in its origins, its inspiration, and its costume --we find the languages of narrative and the aesthetic" (28) is thus hardly an exaggeration. Baumeister claims that masochism involves "more fiction and illusion than nearly any other pattern of human behavior" and goes so far as to assert that masochists even "*fictionalize* pain" itself (12, 14).

**11.** Baumeister pointedly notes that "[T]he view that masochism is a feature of the psychology of women is not tenable. It is misleading and possibly dangerous to label women's typical behavior patterns as masochistic. Arguments for feminine masochism rest on debatable interpretations of complex, ambiguous and nonsexual behavior patterns. As for sexual behavior, which forms the clearest evidence about masochism, women are, if anything, less overtly masochistic than men" (147). I would not disagree, merely reiterate that my interest is in masochistic fantasy.

**12.** Silverman observes that the final phase of the beating fantasy discussed by Freud attests to no less than three highly transgressive desires: "to the desire that it be boys rather than girls who be loved /disciplined in this way; to the desire to be a boy while being so treated by the father; and, finally, to the desire to occupy a male subject-position in some more general sense, but one under the sign of femininity rather than that of masculinity" (48). Mansfield too notes the dislocations that adhere to a masochistic subject who assumes "many positions and semipositions at once, rendering unstable the relationship between power and powerlessness, active and passive, self and other, pain and pleasure, subject and object, male and female" (19).

**13.** In Juhasz, *Feminist Critics*, this poem is cited by Sandra Gilbert (26), Karl Keller (73), Barbara Mossberg (94), Adalaide Morris (104-5), Margaret

Homans (118-19) ,and Cristanne Miller (143). Homans' reading is especially brilliant. In this essay, I am essentially demonstrating how the earlier deconstructive feminist readings of the poet pioneered by scholars like Miller and Homans are significantly reinforced by contemporary theoretical explorations of masochistic fantasy as, in a quite different way, are Stonum's investigations of the sublime in Dickinson.

**14.** Deleuze's observations that Masoch's novels "display the most intense preoccupation with arrested movement" and that "waiting and suspense are essential characteristics of the masochistic experience" (70) lead him ultimately to assert that: "Formally speaking, masochism is a state of waiting; the masochist experiences waiting in its pure form" (71).

**15.** For a development of this outrageous assertion see Smith, *Seductions of Emily Dickinson*.

**16.** John Cody, noting that "a conspicuous willingness to suffer and a predilection for frustration rather than gratification are complex symptoms," observes that "from such self-inflicted pain and deprivation a surprising volume of covert satisfaction and even pleasure can, at times, be wrung." But while also pondering at some length a "dawning masochistic trend" (267) in Dickinson's letters, the poet's psychobiographer chooses, with notable discretion, not to pursue in detail what is, to say the least, an interesting line of speculation.

**17.** In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks argues that "textual energy" becomes useable "only when it has been bound and formalized . . . As the word 'binding' itself suggests, these formalizations and the recognitions they provoke may in some sense be painful: they create a delay, a postponement in the discharge of energy, a turning back from immediate pleasure, to ensure that the ultimate pleasurable discharge will be more complete. The most effective or, at the least, the most challenging texts may be those that are most delayed, most tightly bound, most painful" (101-2). The "most challenging" or "most effective" texts are those which most tightly bind their energetics, and the most tightly bound texts are those which are most contoured by repetition and therefore "most painful." Since the deliberate cultivation of pain by these textual structures is a prerequisite for the "pleasurable discharge" they effect, what Brooks describes is an uncannily painful experience for the reader, an identifiably masochistic hermeneutics.

**18.** Eve Sedgwick too, in an elaborately confessional explication of the relationship between her poetry writing, identification with gay men, and personal beating fantasies, designates the space between the form in which the fantasy is represented and the feelings attached to the fantasy an effect of the work of form itself. The "framing" of the fantasy, its reduction to the

**compressed phrase "a child is being beaten," opens up the possibility of a multiplicity of relations between the subject and the scene of her fantasy. Sedgwick observes of Freud's essay that the "redrawing of the frame in such a way as to banish the other characters of the drama reunites them . . . on the hither side of the viewer's or imaginer's own gaze: the decontextualized legless and often headless figures of di/s/play creates in turn a switchpoint for the identities of subject, object, onlooker, desirer, looker-away" (183).**

**19. Already, work-in-progress in this area by the scholars Marianne Noble and Elizabeth Petrino (presented in conference papers at the ALA meeting in Baltimore, May 1997) has proven very provocative and, I should add, a significant influence on my own thinking on the topic of Dickinson and masochism.**

**20. Recent examples of manuscript fetishization include Howe, *My Emily Dickinson and The Birth-Mark*; and Werner, *Emily Dickinson's Open Folios*. For a measured critique of this curiously *fashionable* tendency in Dickinson scholarship see Mutlu Blasing's excellent "Review Essay." For a rather more judiciously nuanced and theoretically sophisticated use of original manuscript texts see Virginia Jackson, *Emily Dickinson's Misery* (Stanford UP, forthcoming).**

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