

## The Revenge of Cato's Daughter: Dickinson's Masochism

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Evident in Emily Dickinson's writing is a strain of masochistic expression, as the first lines of many poems ("Bind me, I still can sing"; "Joy to have merited the pain"; "He put the belt around my life / I heard the Buckle snap") and countless other phrases ("Most I love the cause that slew me," "a Bliss like Murder"; "an ecstasy of parting / denominated Death") suggest. Likewise, some of her most famous letters are remarkable for their masochistic intensity: "Low at the knee that bore her once unto wordless rest Daisy kneels a culprit - tell her her fault - Master - if it is small eno' to cancel with her life, she is satisfied - but punish dont banish her . . . I've got a Tomahawk in my side, but that dont hurt me much. Her master stabs her more -" (L248).

This masochistic strain has represented a problem for feminists who are considering Dickinson's representations of sexuality. Why does our intellectual, iconoclastic poetic foremother use such patriarchally determined, abject language? Critics have addressed this question tangentially, but by and large they do so in order to dispense with it. <sup>1</sup> No feminist critic has attempted a focused and sustained reading of the ways that masochistic expressions might themselves function as feminist explorations on Dickinson's part. Those who have opted against such an exploration might assume that masochism cannot possibly be empowering for women since it is a feature of an oppressive construct of "normal" femininity that has had abiding power ever since Freud postulated it. <sup>2</sup> Given such a construction of femininity, many feminists have argued that even to discuss possibilities for power and pleasure in female masochism is intrinsically dangerous, since it reinforces oppressive myths of female nature. <sup>3</sup> Camille Paglia's biologically determinist reading of Dickinson's sadomasochism confirms the risks of approaching the subject. <sup>4</sup> I do not mean to discount these risks. But women's empowerment has not always occurred exclusively through resistance to patriarchal representations of female subjectivity and **[End Page 22]** subversions of power. <sup>5</sup> In fact, throughout history women have found a variety of modes of powers and pleasures *within* patriarchally determined existence, in relating to power in collaborative rather than oppositional ways. This is not to say that women have not been victims, but rather to recognize that women have not been *only* victims, that they have always harnessed power, even in unlikely sites. The assumption that female empowerment must transgress patriarchal forms of subjectivity limits inquiries into women's agency in both the past *and* the present.

In exploring masochism, Dickinson is playing power games. To say that she enjoyed playing with dominant discourses in no way challenges the fine scholarship that has recently explored Dickinson's invention of an *écriture féminine*, a language of female desire apart from patriarchal productions of desire. <sup>6</sup> But as her explorations of masochistic discourse indicate, Dickinson also identified possibilities of female power within patriarchal languages themselves. <sup>7</sup> As an example of the pleasures and powers she located in masochism, consider the brief poem "Bind me - I still can sing -":

Bind me - I still can sing -  
Banish - my mandolin  
Strikes true within -

Slay - and my Soul shall rise  
Chanting to Paradise -  
Still thine.

(1005)

In this poem, the speaker associates domination and assault with both power and pleasure. Self-abasement empowers the speaker who, in a peremptory tone, insists upon her right to praise her tormenter. No matter how the other attempts to thwart her, she asserts her will to subject herself, using three imperatives in six lines. Although the general meaning of the poem is "If you bind me, I will still sing," the speaker does not, in fact, say "If." She demands to be bound, banished and slain, asserting not only her prerogative to sing but her superiority over the other, who, in the eyes of an imagined on-looker, is a brute, while she is an innocent, virtuous, passionate, and faithful martyr to a cruel and domineering love. In fact, within the logic of this poem, the more the other abuses her, the more that other empowers her, since abuse intensifies the impression of her heroic innocence. The poem collapses the distinction between abuse and self-assertion, since "my mandolin / Strikes true within" refers both to the pain she suffers and to her artistic activities. **[End Page 23]**

Dickinson's tactic of self-assertion through masochism anticipates a number of recent observations about masochism. In *Masochism and Modern Man*, Theodor Reik writes that the masochist typically "forces another person to force him . . . It is strange and worthy of meditation that the masochist whose character is one of complete submission to his object, of utter obedience, insists in his approach that his will alone be carried out -- disregarding his object's wishes" (84, 87). Likewise, in an oft-quoted 1970 article, V.N. Smirnoff writes:

Masochism is a defiance. It is expressed through the masochist's apparently passive behaviour, by his compliance with the inflicted pain and humiliation, by his claims of being enslaved and used. In fact, the masochist knows that his position is simply the result of his own power: the power of endowing the executioner with the obligation of playing the role of a master, when indeed he is only a slave, a creation of the masochist's desire. (668) 8

Nick Mansfield, in *Masochism: The Art of Power*, agrees that manipulation of a seemingly-powerful other through suffering lies at the heart of masochistic expression:

[T]he masochistic subject wants the dominating other's desire to be represented in the scene, but the representation has to conform completely to his [the masochist's] own desire of her [the sadist's] desire. He wants her subjectivity to be present, and to appear to be present in and of itself. But an autonomous desire arising outside of the guidelines he has set down, and rejecting the parameters of the masochistic scene, is to be ignored, run down by the momentum his own desire is producing. The subjectivity of the other has to be a nothingness that can present itself as a totality (6-7). 9

In "Bind me," Dickinson's sadistic other has no desire apart from the presumed desire to slay the speaker, but that desire is a product of the speaker's masochistic imagination. Dickinson's other is, as Mansfield specifies, a "nothingness that presents itself as a

totality." The question arises, though, why would one seek power by fantasizing about being controlled by another? Why seek the power that inheres in dictating that the other desire only to slay oneself? This is indeed a convoluted way of achieving agency. Stoller, Smirnoff **[End Page 24]** and Reik all point to a need to express an otherwise inexpressible anger. But while "Bind me" might be seen as expressing anger, indicting the other's violence and cruelty, that is not all masochism does in the poem, whose imagery of rising to paradise gestures toward transcendent pleasures that seem more important than the expression of anger. Mansfield offers an intriguing analysis of the masochist's fantasy of power that helps make sense of this transcendence in Dickinson's masochistic poetics. He proposes that the ultimate goal of masochistic fantasy is a state of "total subjectivity" in which the masochist is both a strongly centered ego and everything else. The sadistic "other," a product of the masochist's own fantasy, represents everything "that the subject is supposed to define as its exterior and alternative" (29). In the fantasy, the self is being annihilated, but it is the fantasizer who scripts the sadist's desire to annihilate the masochist. Masochistic fantasy is thereby a fantasy of an impossible state: being simultaneously a strongly centered ego *and* an annihilated self thoroughly merged in the subjectivity of another who represents limitlessness. The idea of annihilation opens the possibility of totality, or limitlessness, while the act of *scripting* that annihilation protects the ego of the fantasizer. The state of "total subjectivity" resembles but is not the same as the fragmented, de-centered state celebrated by poststructuralist psychoanalysis, for the masochist controls the entire aesthetic process. It is an impossible state of simultaneous centering and decentering.

"Bind me - I still can sing" demonstrates how masochistic fantasy idealizes such a state of total subjectivity: though it describes docile submission to annihilation, it is also a poem about the speaker, her body, and her desires. In six lines, the words "me," "my" or "I" occur four times, and the focus is upon both the speaker's artistic and religious aspirations and her own body. This fantasy of annihilation ensures that the fantasizer is, as Mansfield puts it, "never not anything." Such fantasies are particularly appealing to the Victorian female; since the masochist "can operate power while remaining technically removed from it, even highly critical of it," she can emphasize her own pure victimized powerlessness -- in accordance with social norms -- even as she imaginatively controls the situation (42). 10

Dickinson recognized that control through submission represented an important mode of feminine agency, disturbing as that may be to us. As Gary Lee Stonum has noticed, there is a quest for mastery through refusal of mastery in a cluster of her poems that he labels the "deferential sublime," and which I call Dickinson's "sentimental masochism" -- poetry featuring conventional sentimental stereotypes of innocent, vulnerable femininity submissive before domineering masculinity. In keeping with the sentimental tradition, this strain in **[End Page 25]** Dickinson's work foregrounds scenes that might provoke tears by pitifully foregrounding the imminent suffering of a small, frail vulnerable being, and by invoking stock character types that facilitate readerly identification and intense feeling. 11 As Stonum points out, Dickinson understands that the poet of the sublime asserts a violent mastery over the reader. As she told Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry"

[342a]. In her sentimental masochistic voice, Dickinson uses the pose of abjection to achieve deferentially the violent "mastery" that poets of the sublime must exert over their readers -- without asserting mastery -- remaining (as Mansfield puts it) "technically removed from" power. As Stonum argues, this aesthetic stance enables Dickinson to avoid the brutal assault of the sublime poet by emphasizing the victim's experience of the sublime and enabling the reader to identify with experiences of submission to a potentially lethal power. But, like Mansfield, Stonum understands that this position is no less masterful; it is simply a form of sublime mastery achieved through hyperbolic refusal of mastery. As he writes, "Within the differential and comparative hierarchy of the sublime the emperor's is not the only role" (155).

The kinship between masochism and the sublime is striking. Both combine pleasure and displeasure, offering what Kant calls "a negative pleasure," a sense of elation associated with being overwhelmed by a threatening, dominating force. In both cases, one experiences the ecstatic state of being simultaneously oneself and superior to the infinite. In masochistic fantasy, this impossibility is imagined through simultaneous identification with a subject on the brink of annihilation and with the infinitely powerful other bent upon that annihilation. In the Kantian sublime, it is achieved by an experience of being dwarfed by something infinitely large yet simultaneously superceding that sublime object through the act of attempting to imagine it. Noting that the term "masochism" derives from a novelist's name (Sacher-Masoch, author of *Venus in Furs*), Mansfield argues that these sexual and aesthetic experiences are essentially the same thing, only (erroneously) separated in the taxonomy-obsessed nineteenth-century. <sup>12</sup>

Kant proposes that the sublime arises from an expansion of the imagination following a momentary check; in her deferential sublime, Dickinson emphasizes that check itself, the subjugation of the self that precedes the ability of the self to transcend its limiting container of selfhood. In "A nearness to Tremendousness," she describes how pain achieves such an assault upon the self, decentering and destabilizing the individual, who is thereby opened and **[End Page 26]** in a state of readiness for sublime elation. The poem therefore illuminates a crucial step in Dickinson's masochistic sublime.

A nearness to Tremendousness -

An Agony procures -

Affliction ranges Boundlessness -

Vicinity to Laws

Contentment's quiet Suburb -

Affliction cannot stay

In Acres - It's Location

Is Illocality -

(963)

The experience of pain, this poem suggests, is intrinsically transgressive; while contentment quietly remains within the confines of the law, pain will not stay in its place. It defies laws and the boundaries that regulate them (and as Elaine Scarry demonstrates, the coherent symbolic language that articulates them). <sup>13</sup> Pain destroys the peaceful illusion of coherence that is indulged by the bourgeois residents of "Contentment's quiet

Suburb." Pain splits the illusion of identity apart, exposing the gaps that lie at its core. Located in "illocality," pain represents the prospect of a lawless, boundless heterogeneity, an unmaking of systems. Crucially, the actual experience of pain is unnecessary for that unmaking, since a mere "nearness to Tremendousness" procures that lawless, placeless agony. As Edmund Burke writes in his analysis of the sublime, "When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful" (305-6). The imagined experience of affliction enables one to experience the fantasy of the splintering of self and the consolidation of self. As author of a masochistic scenario, Emily Dickinson can be both the afflicted one and the infinite other, thereby experiencing an otherwise impossible simultaneous experience of "illocality" and "location." It is worth noting that the sublime is associated with males, and with the very highest cultural values, while masochism is associated with females and exceptionally low cultural values. But though the sublime emphasizes transcendent elation and masochism cringing servility, those are two steps in parallel processes that are indulged in the pursuit of pleasure. 14

Consider, for example, Dickinson's archly servile, eleven-word poem, "Great Caesar! Condescend." 15 **[End Page 27]**

Great Caesar! Condescend  
The Daisy, to receive,  
Gathered by Cato's Daughter,  
With your majestic leave!

(102)

According to Johnson, Dickinson sent this poem to her brother in 1859. When read as a message to him, it conveys the anger of a sister who abjects herself in histrionic terms in order to make her brother feel guilty for his own professional education and parental respect, since they are denied to his equally deserving sister. But the poem is not merely a private message. Dickinson copied it into a fascicle, and its multiple allusions exploit the intensity of that private expression of aggression for a more sublime end. For as classically-educated Dickinson and her brother would have known, Caesar was the arch-enemy of Cato, who committed suicide rather than submit to Caesar when defeated by him. In offering Caesar a Daisy (Dickinson's code word for herself), Cato's Daughter imagines offering herself as tribute to someone she hates and fears, someone who caused her father's death and could well cause hers. In short, the poem is an abstraction of sublimity: a nearness to tremendousness. The speaker is in a vulnerable situation, subject to whatever abuse her conqueror might choose to inflict. Her vulnerability to the possibility of annihilation draws into the poem a sublime fear of an infinite other, exploiting the physical and emotional tension in this hierarchical dilemma, the current of implied violence and anger surging beneath its stylized pose of elaborately courteous submissiveness. The potential for pain implicit in this fragment invokes the infinite illocality that is always the sought-after sensation in this kind of sentimental masochistic fantasy, since it is a precursor to a sublime experience of absolute totality.

This poem also comments obliquely upon the power of exaggerated submission, since its speaker, Cato's Daughter, is renowned for using self-mutilation as a female form of

agency. As Plutarch reports, Portia, daughter of Cato and wife of Brutus, was a strong-minded woman, "addicted to philosophy, a great lover of her husband, and full of an understanding courage," but she had no outlets for her talents because of her sex. Although her husband stated that "she has a mind as valiant and as active for the good of her country as the best of us," he refused to share secrets with her because she was a woman and therefore naturally prone to gossip. In order to prove she merited her husband's confidence, Portia "made this trial of herself. She . . . gave herself a deep gash in the thigh; upon which followed a great flow of blood, and soon after, **[End Page 28]** violent pains and a shivering fever" (807). "In the height of all her pain," Portia explains to Brutus that she has inflicted this wound on herself to test -- and prove -- her worthiness through extraordinary trials of pain:

what evidence of my love, what satisfaction can you receive, if I may not share with you in bearing your hidden griefs, nor to be admitted to any of your counsels that require secrecy and trust? I know very well that women seem to be of too weak a nature to be trusted with secrets; but certainly, Brutus, a virtuous birth and education, and the company of the good and honourable, are of some force to the forming of our manners; and I can boast that I am the daughter of Cato, and the wife of Brutus, in which two titles though before I put less confidence, yet now I have tried myself and find that I can bid defiance to pain. (807)

Education, breeding and character do not win her her husband's confidence; nor can they alone assure her that she merits it. So Portia turns to self-wounding to prove herself worthy of Brutus' love and confidence. To judge from Brutus' response -- he "lifted up his hands to heaven and begged . . . that he might show himself a husband worthy of such a wife as Portia" -- her gambit worked (Plutarch 807). Stoicism was highly prized in Portia's culture (as in Dickinson's), but there is a difference between facing adversity and creating it for yourself, and presumptions of female physical inferiority in both cultures often made the former unavailable for women. In identifying with "Cato's daughter" in this poem, Dickinson associates herself with someone who empowers herself, with a vengeance, through submission. <sup>16</sup> In abjecting herself before Caesar, she asserts her right to intellectual respect through a mocking variation on Portia's histrionics, exemplifying how masochistic discourse offers a rhetorical device to express anger (indirectly) and to assume (deferentially) the mastery of the sublime poet who creates for readers aesthetic experiences of total subjectivity.

The convergence of pleasure and power in this poem is tinged with the erotic. For the kind of vulnerability that its hierarchy establishes is sexual; what, after all, is Caesar likely to do to his female war booty? The poem exploits the conventional gendering of eroticized domination and submission in its exploration of the pleasures of a nearness to tremendousness, and to the extent that it invokes the sublime, then, it is an erotic sublime. That state is, to a large extent, the goal of Dickinson's masochism, which melds notions of sexual **[End Page 29]** merging with notions of transcendence. Violence is a key term in this melding because -- as letters such as the notorious "Man of Noon" letter suggest -- she tends to associate the intense intimacy and vulnerability of heterosexual merging with a violent assault upon her individuality. For Dickinson, the self tends to be characterized by "polar privacy," a state of radical separation from others, and merging with them therefore poses a threat to the self.

The erotic merge with the other, then, flirts with the death of the "I" (consider the conflation of seduction and death in "Because I could not stop for death"). Georges Bataille foregrounds this kind of relationship between ontology and the risks of erotic fusion in his study of the relationship between eros and violence, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*. Like Dickinson, he posits a self formed through separation and loss, and he adds that ontology is the key to understanding all erotic and religious desire.

Between one being and another, there is a gulf . . . We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity. We find the state of affairs that binds us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear. Along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is. (15)

Because continuity necessarily entails the destruction of "this evanescent individuality," the continuity of sexual merging (and religious transcendence) is intrinsically violent: "In essence, the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation. . . . The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives" (17). We experience, he proposes, a profound ambivalence towards the violence of ecstatic merging, torn as we are between an obsession to achieve a state of "continuity" and an equally powerful obsession to protect our "evanescent individuality." Eroticism, he proposes, addresses these conflicting obsessions. Its practices of physically and emotionally transgressing the boundaries of the self lead lovers to the liminal edge between life and death, a state in which they experience this primal continuity, even as they remain themselves. There is always a possibility of violence in eroticism, since it drives towards a dissolution of individuality, a violation "bordering on murder" (17). He offers an analogy to explain not only his understanding of the simultaneous continuity and discontinuity sought in sex but also why violence is implicit in sex. **[End Page 30]** Imagine, he proposes, the reproduction of a single-celled organism: it splits itself into two. At the moment of splitting, that organism is both itself and no longer itself -- it is simultaneously two and one. This metaphor encapsulates his understanding of the impossible simultaneity of one-ness (continuity) and two-ness (discontinuity) that lovers seek in erotic activity. It also exemplifies why he sees eroticism as essentially violent, since the union that is born implies the annihilation of the individual.

Certainly, Bataille is describing only one way of conceiving eroticism; people do not invariably conceive of intimacy as assault, nor do all people see the self as being constructed through difference. <sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, Bataille's theory provides a useful narrative for discussing Dickinson's masochism which, as we have seen, produces an impossible state of simultaneous identity and non-identity. In such a state, Dickinson imagines simultaneously being herself (discontinuous) and her own infinite object (continuous). As the anxiety of the notorious "Man of Noon" letter suggests, Dickinson understands heterosexual union as potentially violent or lethal to the individuality of its practitioners. <sup>18</sup> But as the eroticism of a poem like "Great Caesar!" demonstrates, she also recognizes that representing the liminal threshold between continuity and discontinuity affords a powerful vehicle for the expression of erotic desire.

Consider, for example, one of Dickinson's erotic paeans to self-dissolution, "My River runs to thee":

My River runs to thee -  
Blue Sea! Wilt welcome me?  
My River waits reply -  
Oh Sea - look graciously -  
I'll fetch thee Brooks  
From spotted nooks -  
Say - Sea - Take Me!

(162)

The tone of this poem echoes that of many conventional nineteenth-century romances in which a winsome little female wishes to merge her little life-stream with that of a powerful sea-husband but wonders what she can offer such a mighty being that he would not already have. In keeping with the conventions of such works, the brook in this poem attempts to win the sea's regard with the allure of "Brooks / From spotted nooks," fresh uncorrupted waters. The poem draws broadly upon a sentimental convention that privileges pure simplicity, and more specifically upon its elaboration in Dickinson's **[End Page 31]** beloved *Jane Eyre*. Like Dickinson's winsome brook, Brontë's Jane has nothing tangible to offer Rochester, but he is captivated nonetheless by her enthusiastic and refreshing candor. The night before their wedding, Jane tells Rochester, "I thought of the life that lay before me -- *your* life sir -- an existence more expansive and stirring than my own: as much more so as the depths of the sea to which the brook runs are than the shallows of its own strait channel" (278). Dickinson echoes Brontë's use of the brook-sea image as a metaphor for the total subjectivity promised to the bride: dissolving her little stream in the sea of an encompassing man affords access to a stirring, deep existence. "Least Rivers - docile to some sea / My Caspian - thee," another poem says, reiterating the way that docility can function as a metonym for the deep expansion of erotic fusion. However, like Brontë, Dickinson also recognizes the possibilities of self-assertion within self-erasure: as her poem ends with a string of imperatives, so too Brontë's novel ends with a blinded, maimed Master in a relationship of equality or even submission to Jane.

To interpret such works as merely ironic jabs at male pretensions to grandeur, however, is to strip them of the erotic desire that their imagery of dissolution and merging expresses. These poems of female dissolution and male absorption are grounded in the prevailing ideology of spousal unity, according to which a woman becomes invisible in marriage, her identity "covered" by that of her husband. <sup>19</sup> While they may assume an ironic stance towards that ideology of the so-called *femme couverte*, they also exploit the sublime erotics that is associated with that state of "total subjectivity," in which a woman is merged with a powerful total subjectivity represented by her husband. Though the poem "Forever at His side to walk," for example, can be read as an ironic commentary on conventional gender roles in Victorian marriage, it operates at multiple levels, including an earnest consideration of the potentially sublime erotic pleasures inherent in the erasure of the female in marriage.

Forever at His side to walk -

The smaller of the two!  
Brain of His Brain -  
Blood of His Blood -  
Two lives - One Being - now -  
Forever of His fate to taste -  
If grief - the largest part -  
If joy - to put my piece away  
For that beloved Heart - **[End Page 32]**  
All life - to know each other -  
Whom we can never learn -  
And bye and bye - a Change -  
Called Heaven -  
Rapt Neighborhoods of Men-  
Just finding out - what puzzled us -  
Without the lexicon!

(246)

This poem is one of Dickinson's most sincere considerations of Victorian ideologies of marriage, according to which subservience and self-renunciation are the keys for eternal joy. Despite the debased nature Dickinson saw in most marriages she observed, the poem finds in conventional discourse a language in which to express her most far-reaching erotic and religious longings. "Forever at His side" explores the sentimental myth of women's embrace of submission in marriage as a model for both earthly happiness and mystical union with God.

The basic premise of this poem is the notion that female self-renunciation is the key to marital union that is a type for the mystical rapture of fusion with God. In marriage a couple can experience the religious delights of eternity ("forever") in an earthly temporal existence ("now"). Marriage is a mystical state of divine eternal presence. According to legal and religious traditions, just as God is the supreme head and it is people's privilege and duty to serve Him, so the husband is the head of the family and it is the woman's privilege and duty to serve him.

The first stanza alludes to the Scriptural foundation for such ideologies: in *Genesis*, it is written that God first made Adam, and then made Eve from Adam's rib for Adam's helpmate. "And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (*Genesis 2:23*). The unity of body yet separateness of being that the Genesis story implies -- "Two lives - One Being" -- was deeply attractive to Dickinson, since, as Albert Gelpi writes, the "problem of the One and the Two" was "the dilemma that determined her response to experience on all levels." <sup>20</sup> Longing simultaneously for autonomy and fusion, Dickinson was deeply attracted to the merge of two lives idealized in spousal unity. While we normally distinguish people related "by blood" from people related "by marriage," Dickinson insists upon a miraculous physical unity in marriage: a wife is "Blood of His Blood." Likewise, the concrete anatomical reference to the organ "Brain" rather than the more etherial "soul," "psyche" or "spirit" **[End Page 33]** emphasizes an (impossible) bodily rather than

simply emotional dimension of marital conjoining.

Female submission is the price required for the mystery of marital unity, the second stanza proposes. If a woman renounces all personal individual experiences, she will be able to participate completely in the totality of her husband's experiences. The stanza elaborates its discussion of marriage with a metaphor of devotional eating. If the "taste" is bad, a woman should eat most of it since all significant experiences are had by the husband. If it tastes good, she should give her husband that pleasure, because if she identifies with him she can have that experience vicariously through him. If she can relinquish all of her own part, and if he is willing to accept her in him, then the two will be able to enjoy on earth the kinds of joys otherwise reserved for Heaven.

This representation of marriage functions as a metaphor for understanding spiritual union. In the third stanza, death and reunion with God is merely a "change" that -- occurring "bye and bye" -- is hardly an interruption for those who have experienced ideal marriage on earth. In Heaven, Christian souls, like brides, experience the empowerment and pleasure of union by renouncing all of their particular concerns. Just as wives find their joy in putting aside their partial pleasures in order to participate in the greater pleasures of powerful male identity, so in Heaven, people will take joy in dissolving their individuality in order to be absorbed in a state of continuity with God.

The last three lines are enigmatic. They can be read as suggesting that women understand the potential for rapturous fusion in marriage but are "puzzled," perhaps because they lack a "lexicon" that enables them to think about simultaneously being one and two. The most prominent lexical element featured in this poem is the body: devotion is best conceived through the image of "walk[ing]" at his side; identity is known through the "brain"; kinship is known as "blood"; fate is experienced as a "taste"; love is experienced as sharing body parts; a lover is represented as a "heart"; and eroticism is expressed as a relationship of a small body to a larger one. As Karen Sanchez-Eppler observes, Dickinson cannot imagine a bodiless self, "not only because corporeality makes complex claims on identity but also because Dickinson understands language itself to be bound up with physicality" (122). If language, the very mechanism by which people "know," requires a body, it is impossible to imagine bodiless knowing. To the extent that the body is the "lexicon" for earthly human understanding, earthly marriage -- according to which two lives are one being -- is exceedingly puzzling. Bodies are the basis of individuation: they visibly separate one person from another -- people **[End Page 34]** have separate brains and separate blood, ideologies of spousal fusion notwithstanding. Human beings' body-centered sense of self makes it difficult for them to comprehend how they might fuse with another being without dying. In heaven, however, whole "neighborhoods" of people are apparently able to experience and understand perfect love because they no longer are confined by a bodily lexicon separating one from another; they have access to a heavenly lexicon in which thought is not confined by binary oppositions. If we take Dickinson's use of the word "men" in the third stanza to refer to "males," then the scenario in heaven may be one in which males are just beginning to learn that to which women have always struggled to reconcile themselves: in dissolution lies the possibility of ecstatic expansion of being.

However, the last stanza also invites an opposite reading, one in which bodies are considered as the basis not of individuation but of sexual conjoining. Rather than implying that comprehension is more perfect in heaven where people do not think in terms of the body but the soul, it might be saying that the heavenly "neighborhoods of men" -- just learning about the joys of submission to a corporate identity -- are hampered because they must do so "without the lexicon," the body. The body may be a *better* lexicon to express the merge of two lives into one than some heavenly, disembodied lexicon. One way that we frequently conceive of the total, non-intellectual intuitive comprehension suggested by "knowing" is in the sense in which "know" is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. Two people can "know" each other again and again with their bodies, enjoying a holistic experience of the other that does *not* consume and encompass the other, "whom we can never learn."

Such a reading reverses the seemingly doctrinal representations of both religion and marriage invoked in the first two stanzas. Here, as Porter observes of Dickinson's poetry in general, "the tone is established and then upset so that the reader is plundered of his first invested consent in the poem" (91). Imagining a Heaven that is impoverished in that it lacks a bodily lexicon transforms Heaven into a merely symbolic existence that can be more fully and directly experienced on earth, with a body. The final stanza suggests that marriage may not be simply a microcosm of divine love; it may also be the original, and divine love the type. Spiritual fusion might simply be a metaphor for erotic fusion. The ecstasies of sexual knowing can be understood by analogy to conventional religious associations, but in such a reading, they are not subordinate to religion. Rather, religious ideologies of submission to a larger being can be seen as providing a discourse of love available for the deft poet to appropriate and invert in order to express carnal, erotic desire. The final stanza, with its simultaneous, opposed readings, vividly displays Sanchez-Epppler's claim that **[End Page 35]** "Dickinson's fantasy of a fleshless liberty constantly collides with the sensual desire for a fully palpable freedom" (123).

In "Forever at His side," the masochistic fantasy of submission and absorption into a larger being enables Dickinson to express an embodied female sexuality. Stonum includes "Forever at His side" in his "deferential sublime" grouping, but though he recognizes that it is a love poem, like others in the grouping in which the speaker "clearly cherishes her bondage" (as in 273), he does not trace through the relationship between the sublime and the masochistic eroticism that an attraction to "bondage" implies (157). But "Forever at His side" indicates that Dickinson's "deferential sublime" exploits the masochistic attractions of yielding up the self in order to fantasize about a sublime and embodied experience of erotic ecstasy.

Dickinson's most masterful use of masochistic fantasy for erotic expression is found in the erotic lyric "I started Early - Took my Dog -," a poem that exemplifies how total subjectivity and erotic desire are twinned in Dickinson's masochistic aesthetic. Longing for the absorption of "Forever at His Side to Walk" and "My River Runs to Thee" but also emphasizing her own role as "the one who longs," the speaker in this poem both is her own autonomous self and is erotically merged with everything else. Like the "Man of Noon" letter, "I started Early - Took my Dog -" vacillates between a longing to be overpowered and outrage over violation. It plays with the idea that if to be consumed is

female destiny, then there may be pleasures in the fantasy of being consumed.

I started Early - Took my Dog -  
And visited the Sea -  
The Mermaids in the Basement  
Came out to look at me -  
And Frigates - in the Upper Floor  
Extended Hempen Hands -  
Presuming Me to be a Mouse -  
Aground - upon the Sands -  
But no Man moved Me - till the Tide  
Went past my simple Shoe -  
And past my Apron - and my Belt  
And past my +Boddice - too - +Bosom/Buckle **[End Page 36]**  
And made as He would eat me up -  
As wholly as a Dew  
Upon a Dandelion's Sleeve -  
And then - I started - too -  
And He - He followed - close behind -  
I felt His Silver Heel  
Upon my Ankle - Then my Shoes  
Would overflow with Pearl -  
Until We met the Solid Town -  
No +One He seemed to know - +man -  
And bowing - with a Mighty look  
At me - The Sea withdrew -

(520)

The symbolic meaning of the sea in this poem has been extensively discussed; it has been read as the unconscious, immortality, death, sexual desire, God, infinity, the universe. All of these, however can be subsumed under a rubric reading the sea as an expansive metaphor for totality of being -- Kant's "absolute totality," Bataille's "continuity," Kristeva's "*chora*," Lacan's "Real." The speaker's visit to the sea of totality of being begins safely because she does not abandon the ego barriers that protect her from dissolution. She has her dog, perhaps for protection, and is merely visiting the sea, not submerging herself in it. She indulges a number of fantasies of connection with the others -- mermaids and frigates look at her and extend their hands to her -- but she is merely observing, "unmoved." She hesitates, understandably, to yield to the obliteration that she associates with liberation from lonely isolation. <sup>21</sup> Like many a Puritan, Dickinson represents merging as a seductive threat to the self.

The collapse of the me / not-me distinction -- the complete dissolution of herself in the gigantic sea -- is enticing even as it is threatening, and the poet turns to a masochistic fantasy of erotic domination to represent her simultaneous fear and desire for merging. She simultaneously indulges and disavows her desire by projecting it onto a mighty Tide / Man who moves the speaker for her. As a passive recipient of the actions he performs, she does not have to own up to her desire, and she can remain physically intact and

morally pure in her own eyes as the observer of her own encroaching dissolution. The Tide / Man who appears to desire the speaker begins to overwhelm her. His creeping up and over her body is both seductive and insidious. The repetition of "past . . . and past . . . and past . . ." gives the impression both of his threatening, unwavering encroachment **[End Page 37]** upon her, as well as a kind of ecstasy in response to the nearness of his tremendousness. She neither flees nor participates as he "ma[kes] as he would eat" her up as he would the "dew" on a (vaginal) "Sleeve." Her state of paralysis compresses the longing for union with the agony of dissolution ("eat me up"). The poem exploits this tension as it creeps closer to the line between life and death. As Bataille might put it, eroticism in this poem is "assenting to life up to the point of death" (11).

At a certain moment, the intensity reaches a climax. The space between the fourth and fifth stanzas conceals the crucial reversal in the speaker's emotional state, but as the fifth stanza begins, she is running, and he is following. Perhaps terror has outweighed the pleasure of the near-seduction. She fears getting in over her head. He almost overtakes her; she feels his silver heel right at her ankle, an image with overtones of imminent violence. Shifting to the conditional (a marker, Miller notes, of the fantasized or repetitive nature of the poem), she worries that if he caught her, her "shoes would overflow with pearl." <sup>22</sup> But the question is, which of the two would produce the pearly fluid overflowing the shoes? He or she? Does she fear his desire to eat her up, or her own desire to be eaten? Is this a rape, or a masochistic revelry in her own near obliteration?

If he really is a projection of her own desire, then the distinction is insignificant. It is the dissolution of her being that she both desires and fears, and it is the fantasized situation of eroticized domination that produces the secretions. Fleeing the flood of pearly foam, she arrives back in the solid town of conventional behavior, curtailed desire, and stable identity. The solidity of the town suggests that the speaker has not suffered the irrevocable psychic collapse she feared because the masochistic *fantasy* enables her to indulge the desire to be "yielded up" without losing her strong controlling self, to be simultaneously dissolved in the sea of continuity and to be safely observing her own ecstatic dissolution. Fantasized identification with both members of a scenario of eroticized domination enables her to achieve the long-desired, elusive "Art to stun [her]self / With Bolts of Melody!"

This use of masochistic fantasy in the service of a feminine erotic sublime caps off the list of uses that Dickinson made of a masochistic voice. As we have seen, this voice also enabled her to express anger, to control others, and to assert an embodied erotic desire -- all without overtly challenging patriarchal restrictions on such forms of agency. Of course, masochism is a less-than-ideal mode of power; control through suffering, for example, is manipulative and dishonest, while an aesthetics of eroticized pain and domination reinforces damaging stereotypes of women. But how many people actually have access **[End Page 38]** to ideal modes of power? Most people are in a position in some way akin to that of Dickinson, struggling to find agency, satisfaction and fulfillment within the particular cultural constraints in which they find themselves. And many of them find meaning in their lives through investments in power rather than through opposition to power. Anyone interested in transforming the social structure, in challenging dominant norms, therefore, must begin with a deep, clear understanding of these investments.

Failure to do so is likely to produce resistance and could even impede the goal of change. It is therefore a hopeful sign that feminists are beginning to acknowledge and study women's frequently collaborative relationships to patriarchal power.

In Dickinson's case, for example, masochistic fantasy affords controlled access to sublime erotic pleasures, and failure to acknowledge the pleasures and powers of such fantasies for both her and her readers strips her of one of her significant achievements, the invention of a powerful poetic voice. She identifies possibilities for self-affirmation and self-expression within a system that can be seen as denying women authoritative voices as cultural subjects. Her masochistic poetry demands that feminist literary critics rethink their notions of what constitutes feminist discourse, since it exploits the resonance and power of dominant discourses without being bound and gagged by them. Because "victim" was not the only position available to nineteenth-century women, neither was resistance to power and a quest for an alternative voice the only form of agency and expression available to them. It is time for feminist critics to take our poetic foremothers seriously enough to respect the full range of their desires and strategies, even ones that challenge prevailing feminist notions of what constitutes true desire and effective empowerment.

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## Notes

**1. Cody represents Dickinson's masochism as a pathological manifestation of "an unconscious commitment to the expiation of guilt feelings" (Cody 267). A few recent feminist works have addressed this attraction tangentially, tending to read manifestations of masochism in Dickinson's letters and poetry as explorations of the social causes of masochism. Helen MacNeil, for example, argues that these expressions expose the social factors that make a woman think, "if I am unloved, it is because I am unlovable. Whatever is done to me, I deserve it" (45). Adrienne Rich and Joanne Dobson maintain that Dickinson's images of females submissive before powerful males are not masochistic but instead exploit conventional heterosexual language to express the union of the archetypes "anima" and "animus" in the poet's own androgynous psyche. Martha Nell Smith and other critics interested in Dickinson's lesbian erotics dispute the relevance of the question altogether, arguing that the attention paid to these representations of the erotics of domination is disproportionate and oppressively silences readings of Dickinson's lesbianism. Both MacNeil and Bennett attribute the critical silence on this vexed aspect of Dickinson's poetry to the risky nature of the subject. As MacNeil writes, "No matter how carefully or specifically a woman depicts it, no matter how much she emphasizes the general case, she does so at the risk of being thought typically feminine" (46).**

**2. For Freud's naturalization of female masochism, see "The Economic Problem of Masochism." For statements of the argument that therefore a masochistic stance cannot be transgressive for women, see Silverman and Noyes.**

**3. The question has been extensively debated among feminists for the past thirty years. For seminal statements denying any possibilities for agency in female masochism, see *Against Sadomasochism*; essays by Jeffreys, Kelly, Cameron and Frazer in *Feminism and Sexuality*; "Sexual Practice" in *Living with Contradictions*; and Jeffrey's "Sadomasochism: The Erotic Cult of Fascism" in *The Lesbian Heresy*. For statements arguing the counter position, see Vance's collection, *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*; d'Aury's discussions of *The Story of O* in de St. Jorre; Weinberg and Kamel's *S and M: Studies in Sadomasochism*; Lynda Hunt's "Doing it Anyway." For studies that address both sides of this dialectic, see Bartky, Rich, Scott and Jackson, and Singer.**

**4. The risks of addressing Dickinson's uses of masochism are showcased in Camille Paglia's discussion of the poet's sadomasochism. Paglia finds in Dickinson's masochism a parody of an essential female masochism. She and Dickinson, she believes, are sterile freaks in revolt against nature, women who rage against an essential femininity that they loathe. Dickinson is Amherst's "Madame de Sade," a woman whose sadism expresses her detestation of the prison of her own gender. Images that McNeil would read as an exploration of the *social causes* of masochism, Paglia reads as an attack on *nature*. Paglia's absolute belief in biological determinism leads her to pronouncements about female nature that are not only detestable but dangerous because they routinely receive serious widespread attention in the contemporary culture at large -- such as her notorious claim that rape (rooted in male nature) is always the responsibility of the woman, who must protect herself against (intrinsic) male aggression rather than expect an (impossible) self-restraint on the part of men. And yet, though Paglia derives appalling social conclusions from her take on the nature / nurture question, she nonetheless offers three useful insights about Dickinson's masochism. First, there is no reason to assume that Dickinson herself was immune to essentialism; her obsession with the sadistic spectacle of flowers repeatedly ravished by lover-bees suggests that she was worried about a barbarism against women rooted in nature, not merely culture. Margaret Fuller, it is worth pointing out, worried about precisely the same thing. Secondly, Paglia usefully spells out how Dickinson's sentimental masochism can function as camp, a pose donned for the pleasures of indulging the sensations associated with hierarchy. And third, Dickinson does exhibit the decidedly sadistic streak that she so lovingly and humorously details. Overall, Paglia foregrounds the important point that Dickinson finds pleasure -- not simply an informed feminist consciousness -**

- in the sensations associated with fantasies of hierarchy. I do not want to be misconstrued as an essentialist with a misogynist social agenda, like Paglia; I do, however, want to suggest that Dickinson's masochism is not simply a sociological critique of the patriarchy (though that is part of it) but is instead a much more risky, and interesting, exploitation of a dominant patriarchal discourse. It is neither simply pathological nor simply anti-patriarchal.

5. For example, Nancy Armstrong offers a deliberately overstated claim that women have historically been powerful "as a means of countering those who would emphasize woman's powerlessness -- and we are certainly rendered powerless in specifically female ways -- and therefore as a means of identifying for critical consideration that middle-class power which does not appear to be power because it behaves in specifically female ways. . . . I want to consider the ways in which gender collaborates with class to contain forms of political resistance within liberal discourse. I want to use my power as a woman of the dominant class and as a middle-class intellectual to name what power I use as a form of power rather than to disguise it as the powerlessness of others" (26). See also Betsy Erkkilla, Karen Sanchez-Eppler, and Teresa de Lauretis.

6. Margaret Homans's "Syllables of Velvet" is a good example of analyses addressing Dickinson's *écriture féminine*. She argues that Dickinson refuses to participate in a conventional, hierarchical discourse of desire but instead turns to metonymic (not representational, metaphoric) language to describe a non-hierarchical, possibly lesbian desire. My argument is not intended to challenge Homans's, but simply to complement it as evidence of another strategy for the expression of a female erotics, one that appropriates and exploits the discourse that, according to Homans, Dickinson uses only to critique its ideological foundations. On Dickinson and *écriture féminine*, see also Cynthia Hogue, Robert McClure Smith, Mary Loeffelholz, Cristanne Miller, and Joanne Feit Diehl.

7. A number of critics have explored the agency Dickinson finds in patriarchal languages themselves. Beth Doriani, for example, observes that Calvinism offers Dickinson an empowered female voice of prophecy. Suzanne Juhasz challenges the Lacanian theory that patriarchal discourse silences women; drawing extensively upon object-relations psycholinguistic theories, she demonstrates how Dickinson's use of metaphor facilitates rather than precludes the expression of womanly concepts such as non-hierarchical connectedness. In addition to such explicit discussions, any number of critics make the point implicitly.

8. As practitioners of sadomasochistic sex invariably insist, the masochist is the author of the script and in control of the relationship. Weinberg and Kamel note: "S&M scenarios are *willingly and cooperatively* produced;

more often than not it is the *masochist's* fantasies that are acted out. Many S&Mers claim, therefore, that the masochist, rather than the sadist, is really in control during a sadomasochistic episode. The partners jointly limit their mutual activities and these restrictions are rarely exceeded. Sadists who are known to disregard previously agreed upon limits are avoided and quickly find themselves without partners" (20). And self-avowed sadist Pat Califia indicates that the masochist writes the script when she sarcastically observes that in the eyes of "fluffy-sweater types," "I'm the one who is ostensibly responsible for manipulating or coercing the M into degradation -- all 130 pounds 5'2" of me" (Weinberg & Kamel 130).

**9.** In her discussion of James Joyce's masochistic letters to his wife Nora, Laura Frost makes a similar observation. Although his letters are explicitly sadomasochistic and pornographic, they mention an "unspeakable word" so dirty it cannot be spoken. Frost interprets this allusion as representing Joyce's desire that he not be scripting his wife's abusive behavior, that he not be dictating every aspect of the script. It is an effort to retain the illusion that she abuses him of her own free will, that she, not he, is in control of their relationship of domination and subordination.

**10.** To the extent that such control through submissiveness is characteristic of the genre of sentimentalism, it renders much of the sparring characterizing early discussions of sentimentalism irrelevant. Ann Douglas's critique of sentimental novels as masochistic and Jane Tompkins's response that their representations of women's roles were not masochistic but rather were efforts to redefine power both miss the point that masochism is itself a form of redefining and seizing power that was available for women to exploit. See Wexler, Armstrong and Sanchez-Eppler for clear illustrations of the way that domestic fiction -- with its patriarchal ideologies of femininity -- has functioned as an agent of middle-class social control, with the result that middle-class white female characters and readers can hardly be interpreted as purely passive victims of male oppression.

**11.** For useful definitions of sentimentality and of the sentimental tradition in America, see Philip Fisher, Jane Tompkins, Ann Douglas, Shirley Samuels, and Gregg Camfield.

**12.** Kant's theory of the sublime is subjective, describing an aesthetic experience produced by the perceiver rather than the object itself. Likewise, most discussions of masochism consistently emphasize its aesthetic qualities as well. Paul Gebhard, for example, writes, "pain per se is not attractive to the masochist . . . Accidental pain is not perceived as pleasurable or sexual. The average sadomasochistic session is usually scripted: the masochist must allegedly have done something meriting punishment, there must be threats and suspense before the punishment is

meted out, etc. *Often the phenomenon reminds one of a planned ritual or theatrical production.* (emphasis added, 37). Both masochistic and sublime experiences are, at root, aesthetic.

**13.** In *The Body in Pain*, Scarry develops the thesis that through language and story, people inhabit a constructed universe that extends beyond the confines of their bodies. Pain, however, shatters language; there is, for example, virtually no language to explain a headache. Though her book emphasizes the suffering associated with the loss of language, which leads to corporeal confinement, her focus upon the psycholinguistic effects of torture also enables us to understand how *fantasies* of pain might exhilarate with the notion of release from a constructed universe that feels constraining and false.

**14.** For a critique of female masochism as a pursuit of transcendence, see Cameron and Frazer, "The Murderer as Misogynist."

**15.** See Robert McClure Smith, Chapter 3, for a clear and compelling overview of the way this and similar, obviously-gendered, poems achieve "a power inversion" (89).

**16.** Dickinson probably knew Plutarch's account of Portia, but the scenes in which Portia stabs herself in the thigh and her tortured, masochistic death scene are also represented in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, which Dickinson knew well.

**17.** Indeed, Dickinson herself does not always conceive of eroticism in masochistic terms. As Henneberg argues, it is more appropriate to speak of Dickinson's eroticisms. Paula Bennett convincingly indicates in Dickinson's poetry a non-heterosexual, non-hierarchical same-sex sensibility; and Martha Nell Smith's analyses of the original manuscripts indicate a startling, systematic pattern of erasures and substitutions of "he's" for "she's," bespeaking a "desperate" effort on the part of Austin Dickinson or one of the other early editors to prevent public awareness of a lesbian sensibility that permeates the manuscripts, including the Master Letters. On the other hand, Pollak convincingly describes a heterosexual sensibility thwarted by the limited possibilities for women's romantic fulfillment in the mid-nineteenth century. Judith Farr has presented clear, convincing cases for simultaneous lesbian and heterosexual desire in the poet, which she labels "The Narrative of Master" and "The Narrative of Sue."

**18.** The "Man of Noon" letter, which Wendy Barker describes as "a letter so dramatic that nearly every Dickinson critic has observed its significance," is typically read for insight into the psychology underlying Dickinson's anxious rejection of marriage. Gilbert and Gubar appropriately link the letter to related poems that feature "an almost masochistic sexual

fascination" combined with a fear of death. The letter, they claim, 'reveals, more frankly than most of the poems, the poet's keen consciousness of her own warring feelings about that solar Nobodaddy who was both censorious "Burglar! Banker - Father,' and idealized Master / Lover" (596). See also Farr, Mossberg, Pollak, and Erkkila, and my own full-length discussion of the convergence of Evangelical and sentimental discourses in this letter in my forthcoming book, *The Masochistic Pleasures of the Sentimental Voice*.

**19.** For useful discussions of the ideology of coverture, or the *femme couverte*, see Marylynn Salmon and Cathy Davidson.

**20.** *Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet* (1). Gelpi attributes this fundamental conflict in Dickinson to her devotion to Emerson, who was, he claims, "an inspiration and model -- perhaps the inspiration and model -- for Dickinson when she was choosing to be a poet" (*Tenth Muse* 223). Unity and variety, he indicates, are the essential poles for Emerson, who writes in *Representative Men*: "Two cardinal facts lie forever at the base; the one, and the two. -- 1. Unity, or Identity; and 2. Variety. . . . Oneness and Otherness. It is impossible to speak or think without embracing both" (qtd. in *Tenth Muse* 222). See, however, Mary Loeffelholz's illuminating challenge to Gelpi's claim for a direct line of descent from Emerson to Dickinson.

**21.** Cody argues that such a yielding represents "the loss of one's psychic integrity in psychosis." He adds: "To be submerged, drowned in a vast sea, lost, alone, hopeless -- this is the subject of many Dickinson poems. . . . The common denominator in all these 'sea poems,' however . . . is the poet's experience of a diffusion of herself -- of the blurring of her own boundaries until she becomes lost in the infinite or expands into infinity herself. . . . Emily Dickinson both courted and feared this experience" (304-5). Cody's inability to distinguish between loss of self and expansion into infinity indicates the correlation between the supposedly pathological phenomenon he describes and the discourses of the romantic sublime.

**22.** Miller 74.

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