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Beyond the Human in Masochism with Deleuze and Story of O

Abstract:

In 1954, the sexually explicit and at times violent novel *Histoire d'O* or *Story of O* was published in Paris under the pseudonym Pauline Réage. Utilising Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, I will approach masochism as the central organising force in *Story of O*, a force that works not only against subjectivity, but against psychoanalytic and all too human binary biologisms of sexuality and experience. I ask what masochism in *Story of O* eradicates and invents to enhance life, where life is understood as that which is beyond, and including, the human – what cures does it propose? Through an analysis of its aesthetics (or symptoms), I argue that *Story of O* produces what is not already recognisable, and it is through this minor, deterritorialising use of language that “an animal enters into things, an assemblage comes into play” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p. 7). Through masochism, O experiences a “jubilation in the loss of both power and ego” (MacCormack, 2023, p. 144) that reaches beyond human experience and perception, challenging the “false Darwinian progression that places humans at the top” (Adams 2014, p. 28). It is through this joy that one would be amiss not to call pleasure that O enters a “becoming-animal” and a “becoming-pack” in a rushing towards a “becoming-imperceptible” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p. 279).

Biographical note:

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***Story of O* and masochism**

In Paris in 1954, the sexually explicit and at times violent novel *Histoire d'O* or *Story of O* (Réage, 1965) was published under the pseudonym Pauline Réage. The novel tells of the “sacred submission” of a woman called O in service of her lover, Rene, who eventually “gives” O to his stepbrother, a harsher “master” called Sir Stephen, who will “own” her until death. Controversial literary themes of sex and violence, pleasure and pain, bondage and discipline, were already familiar to French literature in 1954. Readers were aware of the sadism of Marquis de Sade, whose sadistic libertine novels spanned the 1780s and 1790s, and the masochism of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, whose seminal work *Venus in furs* (Masoch, 1991) was published in *Legacy of Cain Vol. 1: Love*. Like these earlier works of erotic literature, *Story of O* became a celebrated “dangerous book” (1965, p. xxiii). In 1955, *Story of O* received the prestigious Le Prix des Deux Magots. A mysterious press photograph for the prize depicts an entirely obscured woman, presumably the author herself, in a neat, conservative outfit with a piece of cloth tied over her head like a bag. The author is adorned with the aesthetics of masochism: the gloves, the fabric over her head, the two men leaning in close on either side. If only she were wearing furs.

After Le Prix des Deux Magots, the book attracted the attention of the Paris police’s vice squad, the Brigade Mondaine, which was responsible for the policing of morals, such as the control and repression of prostitution, homosexuality, drug trafficking, and publications deemed to be obscene. In lieu of an author, Jean Paulhan, who wrote the flattering preface for *Story of O* which continues to accompany it to this day, as well as the book’s publishers, Jean-Jaques Pauvert of the original French edition and Maurice Girodias of Olympia Press, publisher of the first English edition, were interrogated in police headquarters. They kept their silence, however, and Pauline Réage was not “unmasked” until 1994, when John de St. Jorre published a profile in the *New York Times* revealing her to be Dominique Aury – journalist, critic, editor, translator. In fact, even the name Dominique Aury was itself yet another moniker. Aury’s birth name was Anne Desclos, a name that she gave up some time after World War II; as I will go on to argue, the instability of the subject is central to the masochism of *Story of O*. It is in this 1994 interview with de St. Jorre that Aury, aged eighty-six years old, reveals that *Story of O* was written initially for the audience of one man, Jean Paulhan himself, who famously described it in his preface to the text as “the most ardent love letter any man has ever received” (1965, p. xxxi). The relationship between Aury and Paulhan spanned three decades, including across Paulhan’s second marriage. He and Aury kept their relationship as discreet as possible throughout the marriage until his death in 1968.

In his forward to *Masochism: Coldness & cruelty* (Sacher-Masoch, 1991) Gilles Deleuze invents a new concept of symptomatology to ask what masochism and sadism, as unique terms irreducible from one another, invent through art. Because “symptomatology is always a question of art” symptomatology is, to some extent, aesthetic (p. 14). As Ronald Bogue has summarised, the writer for Deleuze is a Nietzschean physician of culture who is not only an interpreter of signs (or symptoms), but “also an artist who joyfully eradicates cultural pathogens

and invents new values that promote and enhance life” (*Deleuze on literature*, Bogue, p. 14). As such, I ask what masochism in *Story of O* eradicates and invents to enhance life, where life is understood as that which is beyond, and including, the human – what cures does it propose? How does masochism in *Story of O* reach beyond or “deterritorialize” the human, what else does it form? Finally, how can this line of inquiry assist in addressing what Frida Beckman calls the “tension between desire and pleasure” in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari? Where Deleuze and Guattari argue the masochist demonstrates the immanence of desire owing to its “denial” of pleasure or orgasm through waiting, suspense and freezing, I wonder alongside Beckman if a desire of “sexual and deeply pleasurable resonances” might instead be possible (Beckman, 2011, p. 13). However, where Beckman argues that the masochism of *Story of O* does not provide a way of addressing this tension owing to the unidirectional nature of O’s desire, first for Rene and then for Sir Stephen, I argue instead that through the masochism of *Story of O*, the singular, frozen, human subject is deterritorialized in favour of the forming of an multidirectional and shifting pack that constitutes a pleasurable “becoming-inhuman” in a “rushing towards” a “becoming-imperceptible” (1987, p. 279).

Masochism “produces what is not already recognisable”, and it is through this minor, deterritorializing use of language that “an animal enters into things, an assemblage comes into play” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p. 7). The masochist becomes a dog when they are placed on a leash, or a clock when bruises and welts are surveyed as a new form of time and intensities. In a posthumanist sense, masochism becomes the technology through which the human is transformed and ultimately overcome. In a Deleuzian sense, masochism becomes a force that works against subjectivity itself, as well as monogamous, heterosexual, psychoanalytic and “all too human” binary biologisms of sexuality, perception, and experience. Through masochism, *Story of O* reaches beyond or “deterritorializes” the human to form a becoming-animal and becoming-pack, demonstrating an immanent desire that retains a relation with pleasure with no exceptions, not even masochism.

Symptomatology & minor literature

The terms masochism and sadism were named after Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and Marquis de Sade by German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing in his book *Psychopathia sexualis*, originally published in 1894 (2012). Krafft-Ebing describes sadism and masochism as pathological states in “perverse individuals”, with sadism constituting “the desire to cause pain and use force” and masochism as its “complete opposite”, in “the wish to suffer pain and be subjected to force” (2012, p. 89). The terms are presented alongside a wide range of other sexual inclinations deemed to be the results of “neurosis” and “perversion”, such as homosexuality and bisexuality (2012, p. 195). For Krafft-Ebing, masochism and sadism are transcendent diseases, collections of symptoms that are always a response to some outside force – the reaction of the inert body or mind against a power beyond itself. Sigmund Freud adopted a similar approach, diagnosing sadism and masochism within the Oedipal whirlpool of the mother and father, though in addition Freud also invents a “sodomasochistic” entity, claiming the symptoms of masochism and sadism are “habitually found to occur together in the same individual” (2001, p. 159).

In *Masochism: Coldness & cruelty*, Gilles Deleuze develops a new approach to the masochism of Sacher-Masoch, whose *Venus in furs* is republished alongside Deleuze's essay, and the sadism of Sade, claiming that through Sade and Masoch "the critical (in the literary sense) and the clinical (in the medical sense) may be destined to enter into a new relationship of mutual learning" (1991, p.14). Deleuze not only vehemently opposes the existence of a "sadomasochistic" entity as proposed by Freud, but he develops a new concept of symptomatology that approaches masochism and sadism differently. According to Deleuze, etiology, which is the set or manner of causes of a disease or condition, must be subordinated to symptomatology, which he defines as medicine's "literary, artistic aspect" (p. 133). Symptomatology is an action and an art; the diagnosis of a disease is an athletic process of invention and genesis, and diseases are not good or bad. Diseases are simply collections of symptoms (or signs) which are constantly in flux, and both diseases and symptoms are renamed and regrouped over and over throughout history (p. 15). This constant process of the refinement of symptoms leads to the coining of new diseases in what is "a major linguistic and semiological step, inasmuch as a proper name is linked to a given group of signs" (p. 16). Through symptomatology, Deleuze asks what masochism and sadism, as unique terms irreducible from one another, invent through art. Because "symptomatology is always a question of art" symptomatology is, to some extent, aesthetic (p. 14). Not only are Sacher-Masoch and Sade great clinicians and great anthropologists, "embracing a whole conception of man, culture and nature", but they are great artists, discovering "new ways of thinking and feeling and an entirely original language" (p. 16).

The concept of symptomatology has similarities to the equally active and creative concept of minor literature that Deleuze and Guattari present in their study *Kafka: A minor literature* (1986). In *A thousand plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari designate a "minoritarian" mode for a term that is unfixed, creative and open in its "becoming", and a "majoritarian" mode for a term that is already given, fixed and expressive rather than creative (1987, p. 106). Unlike major writers, who affirm and solidify dominant power structures, minor writers are social and political "collective assemblages of enunciation" that speak together to invent a people who are missing and a people to come (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, p. 18). Deleuze writes of Sacher-Masoch that "his work is deeply influenced by the problems of nationalities, minority groups and revolutionary movements in the Empire" (Masoch, 1991, foreword by Deleuze, p. 9). Aury uses the term "minor" herself in *A girl in love*, which was published as a preface to *Return to the château*, the little-read sequel of *Story of O* (1965), when stating that she had not read Sade prior to writing *Story of O*: "I already had my own secret society, however minor and inoffensive" (1971, p. 12). What minor writers say is the utterance of a collective value, a common action that is necessarily political (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p. 17). Symptomatology has a similarly political status; what is considered a disease throughout history, as well as its arrangement of symptoms, is rooted in the demands and norms of dominant power structures [1].

In the years prior to the publication of *Story of O*, France underwent a period of brutal occupation at the hands of Nazi Germany. The romantic relationship between Dominique Aury

and Jean Paulhan began when they were both members of the French Resistance, working to distribute the clandestine publication *Les lettres Françaises*, of which Paulhan was co-founder and editor. Dorothy Kaufmann (1998) presents a detailed history of this time through Dominique Aury's romantic relationship with Edith Thomas, who was a French novelist, journalist, and archivist, as well as a contributor to *Les lettres Françaises*. Despite Aury stating that she was able to love "several people at the same time", the relationship with Thomas became platonic after Aury fell in love with Paulhan, with Aury saying that Thomas was "more exclusive, more possessive" than she (p. 839). The friendship spanned across the entirety of Aury's relationship with Paulhan, with Aury stating that she spoke to Thomas "every day of her life until her death" (p. 886). Aury, Thomas and Paulhan, alongside many other writers and works, were a part of a wider social and political collective assemblage of enunciation that spoke together to invent a people who are missing and a people to come – in the clearest sense, a French republic free from Nazi rule.

I argue, however, that there are overt implications for anti-fascism that stretch beyond strictly "human" concerns. As Carol Adams argues, "conditions for violence flourish when the world is structured hierarchically, in a false Darwinian progression that places humans at the top" (2014, p. 28). We remain stuck in a harmful anthropocentrism so long as "the world" is constructed for and from human experience and perception. "How are people made less human?" Adams asks (p. 28). Two of the most predictable ways, she claims, are to "define them as false mass terms and to view them as animals" (p. 28). Masochism takes the fascist scheme of dehumanisation and turns it on its head, revealing anti-fascist and anti-anthropocentric potential. Patricia MacCormack claims there is a "jubilation in the loss of both power and ego that anti-fascism affords" that directly contradicts the maxim of fascist Nazi Germany's *Kraft durch Freude*, or "strength through joy" (2023, p. 144). All anthropocentrism is fascism, all human exceptionalism is fascism, but to point this out is to be a "destroyer of joy", where joy refers to access to imposed power, "not strength through joy but joy through strength" (p. 145). Like anti-fascism, masochism demonstrates a joyous loss of power and ego that reaches its greatest political potential when its grip on *humanness* slackens, when it undergoes a purposeful *dehumanisation* and an *objectification*. *Story of O* is a work of minor literature not because its author is a woman, but because of how it manipulates language to invent new values that soften the mortar upholding hegemonic structures of patriarchal, heterosexual, monogamous, fascist, and anthropocentric modes of being.

As Ronald Bogue has acutely noted, however, it is not that the concept of minor literature is that of a literature written by cultural or linguistic minorities per se, but that of a literature that manipulates linguistic variables through a minor usage, setting language itself into disequilibrium (2003, p. 8). One such strategy is the use of language with a "high coefficient of 'deterritorialization'" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, p.16). Deleuze and Guattari define deterritorialization as the freeing of a possibility or event from its actual origins (p. 96). Utilising this, we can also understand the process of symptomatology, with its renaming and regrouping of diseases and symptoms, as an ongoing process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. As Claire Colebrook has described, the deterritorialization of language in literature can take many forms, such as the nonsensical world of Lewis Carroll or the exchange

of individual characters for flowing “blocks of becoming” demonstrated by Virginia Woolf (2002, p. 94). It can also be manifest in grammatical aberrations such as frequent full stops or “incomplete” sentences, such as in Polish-Australian Ania Walwicz’s poem Australia: “You’re poor and spread thin. You big. So what. I’m small. It’s what’s in.” (1981), or language that stutters or becomes sound, as in the Greek-Australian poet Pi O’s poem “I’m Clit, Cock”, the contents of which are the phrase “I’m Clit, Cock” repeated over and over again (personal communication, January 16, 2025).

Masochism can also set language into disequilibrium, such as when the moans and cries of the masochist become nonsense in *Story of O*: “True, she did speak as she was being tortured, but can moans and cries be classed as words?” (Réage, 1965, p. 37). Additionally, masochism can deterritorialize words. One such example can be found in the masochistic term “slave”. Despite the use of signed contracts in Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in furs* (1991), and the verbal contracts in Aury’s *Story of O*, neither Sacher-Masoch’s Severin nor Aury’s O is ever owned in legal terms. Rather than “slave” being used in the majoritarian sense – to describe a person who is enslaved against their will, oftentimes legally “owned” by someone else – through masochism the term “slave” is reterritorialized to include consent. To take this even further, however, in the case of the character O, the question of whether she truly does consent to her slavehood is at times quite unclear, because the very concept of “will” itself is not given in *Story of O*, nor are the concepts of “pleasure” or “pain”. In *Story of O* these terms – slave, will, pleasure, pain – are minoritarian; they are open in “becoming”. In the following section I will elaborate on Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “becoming” in relation to what I argue are the inhuman possibilities of masochism and desire.

O, becoming, desire

The literature on *Story of O* has often avoided interrogation of its nonhuman aspects in favour of the topics of gender and sexuality, as well as biographical research about the author and the historical circumstances of the time in which she lived. Kaufmann acknowledges that prior to learning the identity of the author, she, alongside “many feminists”, thought the text was a “pornographic fantasy of a woman’s absolute submission and self-degradation” that could “only have been imagined by a man” (1998, p. 883). Amber Jamilla Musser compares the feminist uproar provoked by *Story of O* at the time of its publication to the lack of feminist backlash for the more contemporary masochistic text *Fifty Shades of Grey*, arguing that the latter “consolidates heterosexual privilege and whiteness whereas *Story of O* invests in the radical space of self-annihilation” (2015, p. 128).

The theme of anonymity in *Story of O* has been explored by Anne Young (2013), who demonstrates a strong conceptual alignment between the erotic novel and Aury’s volume of critical essays *Literary landfalls*. Young argues that Aury’s use of a pseudonym when publishing *Story of O* was a critical experiment, and not simply a case of a woman attempting to preserve her reputation. Indeed, as Aury writes in her preface to *Return to the château*, “nothing is more fallacious and shifting than an identity” (1971, p.10). Young claims that for Aury, “identities are merely roles, which can be worn by anyone who wants to” (2013, p. 322).

However, Young does not go so far as to ask what kind of identities are worn or indeed discarded in *Story of O*, and she makes no analysis of the text in terms of its inhuman aspects.

Romana Byrne agrees that O's subjectivity dissolves, analysing this in terms of the Dionysian destruction of Apollonian principles, as presented by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1999) and *Will to Power* (1901). While Byrne does refer directly to O's "owl-masked slide from humanity", she again goes no further to analyse the text's engagements with what is beyond the human (2012, p. 205). For example, she does not make a connection between Nietzsche's Dionysian principles, which consist of the dissolution of the willing individual self in favour of "a mystical sense of oneness" (1999, p. 19), and the possible breaking down of the division between not only human and neighbour, but human and animal, vegetal and mineral.

For Andrea Dworkin, *Story of O* demonstrates the "psychology of submission and self-hatred found in all oppressed people" (1974, p. 107). Rather than create a new language of a people to come, O "claims to define epistemologically what a woman is, what she needs, her processes of thinking and feeling, her proper place" (Dworkin, 1974, p. 107). Dworkin's reading goes on to engage with the nonhuman aspects of *Story of O*, but it hinges on the association of the human with the powerful and the full, in contrast with empty and passive animal, vegetal, and mineral worlds. In an anthropocentric vision that denotes other-than-human beings as void in comparison to the essential power of the human, Dworkin says of O: "she is woman, and to name her 0, zero, emptiness, says it all. Her ideal state is one of complete passivity, nothingness, a submission so absolute that she transcends human form (in becoming an owl)" (1974, p. 108). I argue instead that to read the letter "O" as an empty "zero", as Dworkin does, rather than an eternal and open sign, is to clam up the orifices of the body – the mouth, the anus, the vagina – through which language, noise and pleasure emerge. In short, if O "transcends" the human form, it doesn't mean she does so to become "nothing".

As Frida Beckman has summarised, most critical interrogations of masochism have been psychoanalytic, gendered and separated (2010, p. 98). For many, the female masochist "does not really surpass her regular subjective limits while a male masochist moves into the "'enemy terrain' of femininity" (Beckman, 2010, p. 98). For Beckman herself, *Story of O* (1965) is demonstrative of a masochism "stuck" in the unified subjectivity and unidirectional desire demonstrated in *Masochism: Coldness and cruelty*, as opposed to the multidirectional, subject-less masochism that exemplifies the concept of desire as immanent in Deleuze's later work with Felix Guattari. In *A thousand plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari use the masochist's suspension and disavowal of pleasure to further the concept of desire as immanent, rather than based on lack. The immanence of desire is related to the concept of desiring-machines that Deleuze and Guattari develop earlier in *Anti-Oedipus* (1983). Desiring-machines deterritorialize the concept of desire, wrenching it from the "daddy-mommy-me" triangulation of the Oedipus mould. As Beckman summarises, through desiring-machines, sexuality is transformed from "a dirty little secret" into a productive energy (2011, p. 9). Desiring-machines challenge the "all-too-human" binary biologism of the sexual difference of two sexes, affirming instead the capacity for a nonhuman sexuality of *n*-sexes. They are a "pure multiplicity" against

the “One” of psychoanalysis, and in keeping with Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the immanence of desire, they produce a flow of desire from themselves.

It comes as a surprise then, when, following this productive concept of desire, Deleuze and Guattari claim that pleasure will assuage, silence, interrupt and discharge desire as “the only way for persons to find themselves in a desire that exceeds them” (1987, p. 156). Considering Deleuze and Guattari designate subjectification, alongside signification and the organism, as one of the three strata that “most directly bind us”, there could be no harsher insult when they say “pleasures, even the most artificial, are reterritorializations” (p. 156). They equate the organism with the stratifying forces of the state and the family, blocking access to the plane of consistency and anchoring us in “this, our world” (p. 158). Instead, they propose making yourself a “body without organs” (BwO): “why not walk on your head, sing with your sinuses, see through your skin, breathe through your belly” (p. 151). The masochist body, they claim, is fundamentally a question of a BwO, which is “the field of immanence of desire, the plane of consistency specific to desire, with desire defined as a process of production without reference to any exterior agency, whether it be a lack that hollows it out or a pleasure that fills it” (p. 154). In other words, because masochism “denies” pleasure through waiting, suspense, and freezing, it successfully constitutes a BwO and an immanent, uninterrupted desire.

As Beckman points out, this requirement that pleasure be divorced from desire and sexuality is at odds with the idea of sexuality as a revolutionary machine (2011, p. 3). The concept of pleasure as something external a subject can “reach” or “discharge” threatens to return sexuality to the genitalia of the all-too-human body, as well as the self of psychoanalysis. I am in agreement with Beckman’s claim that “surely sexuality needs to retain some relation with pleasure” (p. 13). According to Beckman, *Story of O* does not provide a way of addressing this tension. Beckman argues that, because the pleasure O awaits is the love of René and Sir Stephen, the text is suggestive of the unidirectional desire of *Masochism: Coldness and cruelty*, and at odds with the subject-less function of desire in *A thousand plateaus*. As I have indicated above, I would like to take a different approach. Rather than argue that O’s pleasure is the love of René and Sir Stephen, and therefore exemplary of a desire that is “channelled in a specific direction and kept within the realm of the subject” (Beckman, 2010, p. 101), I claim that pleasure in *Story of O* is the dissolution of the singular, frozen, human subject, in favour of the forming of an amorphous and shifting pack that is a becoming-inhuman and a becoming-imperceptible.

For Deleuze and Guattari, life is made up of difference and becoming. Difference is the only constant, the only thing that returns and repeats, and becoming is a “capturing, a possession, a plus-value, but never a reproduction or an imitation” (1986, p. 13). There are no original beings that then become something else, only constant “hybrids”, and life is enhanced by “mutating” or “varying” in as many ways as possible, through a “maximum of encounters” (Colebrook, 2002, p. 133). In the context of Franz Kafka and his “bestiary”, the writer isn’t a “writer-man”, but a “machine-man”, an “experimental man”, who, through voice and sound and style, “ceases to be a man in order to become an ape or a beetle, or a dog, or mouse, a becoming-animal, a becoming-inhuman” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p.13). Becoming-animal is “to participate in

movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities” (p. 13). Becoming-animal is not an end in itself, but a rushing towards a “becoming-everything” or a “becoming-imperceptible”, which Deleuze and Guattari define as the “immanent end of becoming, its cosmic formula” (1987, p. 279).

Life is becoming and difference, but perception can reduce these complex flows by contracting or actualising them into material objects viewed by a subject that perceives (Colebrook, 2002). As Colebrook summarises, “we become imperceptible – no longer disengaged from life and difference – by becoming one with the flow of images that is life” (2002, p. 128). “Becoming-imperceptible” would mean letting go of subjectivity and experience to become one with the flow of images, in all of their complexity and difference. While this might sound difficult or even impossible, becoming-animal through art is one way we can move towards a “becoming-imperceptible”. For example, seen from the inhuman eye of a drone, a video work depicting a hedge maze can wrestle it from something recognisable and repeatable (in this case, a puzzle for human beings) and return it to the chaos of perceptions and images. We suddenly recognise the human brain as “one possible perception and not the origin of perceptions” (Colebrook, 2002, p. 128). The human perception of the hedge formation as a “puzzle” shifts to allow perceptions other than that which are given, or “actual”. The “puzzle” becomes a landing site, a burrow, a formation of colour, temperature or heat.

As Colebrook states, Deleuze also refers to the different “speeds” of animal and plant life in order to shift perception. Understanding what something is “means understanding its duration, its power to perceive and contract the differences of its milieu” (p. 8). In the next section, I will address the speed and temperature of masochism to argue that a becoming-animal and a becoming-imperceptible occurs in *Story of O* when the individual, human subject dissolves into a pack, a population, and a multiplicity. Packs constitute an inhuman element of masochism consistent with the BwO and desiring-machines that have not been discussed in detail previously, but that are present in both *Story of O* and *Venus in furs*, as well as preliminarily signalled to by Deleuze in *Masochism: Coldness and cruelty*.

The speed of masochism

Deleuze and Guattari introduce the idea of packs of “demonic animals” in *A thousand plateaus*. Unlike the “overcoded animals” of the state, such as that found on a coat of arms, or “sentimental, Oedipal animals each with its own petty history”, such as family pets, demonic animals are a “multiplicity, a becoming, a population, a tale” outside the filiation of the hereditary of the family unit (p. 240). Demonic animals are associated with the movement and speed of a pack: crowding, swarming, teeming, growing, diminishing, hopping, populating. Just like becoming-imperceptible is a “question of speed and movement” the pack is a “speed or a temperature, which is not composed of other speeds and temperatures but rather is enveloped in or envelops others, each of which marks a change in nature” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 32).

In *Masochism: Coldness and cruelty* Deleuze diagnoses “frozen”, “suspended” and “photographic” qualities as a primary symptom or “speed” of masochism (Sacher-Masoch, 1991, foreword by Deleuze, p. 70). Deleuze claims the masochist experiences waiting in its “pure form”, which is divided into two currents: the first representing an indefinite awaiting of pleasure and the second an intense expectation of pain. For both O and Sacher-Masoch’s Severin there are frequent and extended periods of time where they each await the whip, or the caresses that sometimes follow it. In Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in furs*, this frozen quality also appears frequently when Severin and Wanda catch sight of themselves in mirrors. In *Story of O*, mirrors are so common that it is always noted when a room is missing one. Even then, O manages to catch “a vague reflection of herself in the black lacquer surface of a screen” (p. 138). Just as relevant is O’s job as a fashion photographer, literally capturing and freezing movement into still images. When O first meets Jacqueline, a poor and beautiful model who she lusts after, she takes photographs of Jacqueline that are “like nothing she had ever taken before”, “never before had she been able to extract such meaning and emotion from a face or body” (p. 61). In fact, both Aury’s Jacqueline and Sacher-Masoch’s Wanda are “frozen” in art – Jacqueline by the photography of O in the first instance, and Wanda by a German painter who promptly falls in love with her. Wanda and Jacqueline also both wear furs (though the emphasis on them is more important to Severin, to the point of fetish) and both are continually described as cold, hard, and statue-like in their beauty so as to approximate a loss of human life: “her head was magnificent in spite of the stony, lifeless eyes” (Sacher-Masoch, 1991, p. 143); “she looked like some blissful girl who had drowned, she was pale, so pale” (Réage, 1965, p. 61).

Deleuze claims this “coldness” of masochism is the disavowal of sensuality in favour of sentimentality and towards the birth of a new man “devoid of sexual love” (Masoch, 1991, foreword by Deleuze, p. 128). This reading contains a hint of the aforementioned tension between desire and pleasure demonstrated in *Anti-Oedipus* and *A thousand plateaus*. At the same time, “sensuality is movement” (p. 70). However, in both *Story of O* and *Venus in furs*, the cold, frozen body is only made possible in contrast with the hot, moving one; the moving bodies of Jacqueline and Wanda must “pose” to be captured by the still image. Suspense and movement, coldness and hotness, are the key qualities of masochism, not suspense and coldness alone, as Deleuze emphasised. It is in the suspense of the cold iron held to heat over the hot flame, and then the movement of the iron when it is taken and pressed to the buttocks, initiating one lone head of cattle into the herd, that the subject is dismantled, and a pack is formed. The forming of a pack in masochism is only possible through suspense and movement. It is through the suspense of the chains and the movement of the cat of nine tails (notice the sheer number of tails) that the skin – the largest organ of the body – is opened and allowed to “breathe”, deterritorializing the subject: “the chains and the silence, which should have bound her deep within herself, which should have smothered her, strangled her, on the contrary freed her from herself.” (p. 37). Deleuze noted the triangulation necessary to Sacher-Masoch in *Masochism: Coldness and cruelty* when he brought attention to Masoch’s habit of including a handsome male competitor, such as “the Greek” in *Venus in furs*, but there are other possible members of a pack circling the coupling of Wanda and Severin. These members include the poor German

painter who does Wanda's portrait, the three black girls who execute some of Wanda's more inventive punishments, and the ever-present possibility of Wanda's adoption of other lovers.

In *Story of O*, the inclusion of other parties is urgent and necessary in order to compose the masochists' desire: "She had moaned beneath the lips of the stranger as never her lover had made her moan, cried out under the impact of a stranger's member as never her lover had made her cry out" (p. 29). *Story of O* begins when O's lover Rene takes a blindfolded, confused yet compliant O to a château in Roissy. The château is a carefully cultivated stronghold of domination and submission: cold stone rooms are fitted with opulent rugs for the women to kneel on; fur clad ottomans for bending over women litter the floor; iron ringlets adorn the walls to which the women are chained, dressed as they are with iron bracelets and collars. The women use their mouths and hands to caress the "anonymous" male "masters", or are "taken" by them in any way that pleases them. Rene and the other three men wear masks, so that O will "no longer be able to tell them apart" (p.11). After all four have "taken her", O marvels that she had not been able to distinguish Rene from the others (p. 10). In addition to the masters, valets work in shifts. The valets hold the keys to every room and are responsible for the chaining and unchaining of the women, as well as administering their nightly whipping when none of the masters have the time. If they like, they may also "take" the woman in whatever manner they desire at this time.

Where at first the thought of not knowing the identity of the men who "ravage" her distresses her, O begins to accept and even "love" her anonymised ravagement and humiliation. In time, O begins to view the other masters at Roissy as though they are "so many reflections" of Rene: "he was the hand that blindfolded her, the whip wielded by the valet Pierre, he was the chain above her head, the unknown man who came down on her, and all the voices which gave her orders were his voice" (p. 42). "Their hands were his hands, their orders his orders" (p. 80). O is told that her body is not her own, and tied in such a way that she is unable to even touch her own body or close her legs. Her submission is approached as a team effort, of which she is a part. Her flogging and chains, and her confinement, is intended to teach O that she is "totally dedicated to something outside" herself (p. 16). O becomes "anyone, anyone at all. Any one of the other girls, opened and forced like her" (p. 37). This becoming-anyone is a first step towards becoming-animal and becoming-imperceptible.

A "becoming-anyone" can also be seen in the mutability of names and identity that permeates the masochistic literary assemblage. In *A girl in love*, Aury describes under the signature of Pauline Réage an illicit love affair in which books, the lovers' "only complete freedom", were read in a "toneless voice in an unknown room, the sordid and miraculous dungeon against which the crowd outside, for a few short hours, beat in vain" (1971, p. 5). Here, as in *Story of O* and *Venus in furs*, the masochist subject is unreliable, nameless, even inconsequential, to the point of a wilful and limitless submission and slavishness. Even though Aury doesn't describe her affair with Paulhan to be one of masochist and master, it becomes masochistic because of its painful but obedient acquiescence to hotel rooms or "dungeons": "they both used a vocabulary of prisoners whose prison does not revolt them" (Réage, 1965, p. 8). In *Story of O*, there is also, of course, the partial moniker "O" and the extensive use of pseudonyms by

Dominique Aury in her life and writing. Even the name Sabine d'Estrée, translator of the second English edition of *Story of O* published by Grove Press, has been revealed to be a pseudonym [2]. In *Masochism: Coldness & cruelty*, Deleuze writes that anonymous letters, pseudonyms, and advertisements in newspapers “set love affairs in motion” in both Sacher-Masoch’s own life as well as in his fiction (Sacher-Masoch, 1991, foreword by Deleuze, p. 18). In *Venus in furs*, Severin actually loses his name: “From now your name is no longer Severin, but Gregor”, commands Wanda (p. 205).

All throughout her time at Roissy, O maintains her commitment and “love” for Rene, who holds her close and reciprocates: “I love you. When I’ll also have given you to the valets, I’ll come in one night and have you flogged till you bleed” (p. 30). The term “love” is deterritorialized here, just like the terms “will”, “slave” and “consent”. Through masochism, “love” is removed from its original territory as a monogamous and heterosexual concept and expanded to include an array of sexual partners of any quantity or gender, and of varying levels of commitment and longevity outside the “til death do you part” of the hereditary family unit. When O leaves the château with Rene to return to her own apartment and job, Rene tells O that she is “free not to love him any longer, and to leave him immediately” (p. 54). If O does still “love” him, however, he says she is “in no wise free” (p. 54). O sits and listens quietly, thinking his “proprietaryship” is “beyond any proof” (p. 54). Soon after this, Rene “gives” O to his older stepbrother, a harsher master called Sir Stephen. Rene’s passion is even further inflamed by Sir Stephen’s punitive treatment of O. “Impressed and overwhelmed” by her welts, he reassures O that he still “loves” her (p. 105). As time goes on, O falls in “love” with Sir Stephen, in addition to being in “love” with Rene, and believes Sir Stephen to be in “love” with her as well.

As has been mentioned above, at her job as a photographer O also meets someone else, a model by the name of Jacqueline. Jacqueline comes from a poor family, and she accepts O’s invitation to live with her in her apartment. With Sir Stephen’s encouragement, O seduces Jacqueline, and the two women become lovers. Jacqueline is a passive and selfish lover in her relationship with O. Her cold manner and beauty also captivates Rene, who instructs O to help him convince Jacqueline to come to Roissy. When Jacqueline and Rene begin sleeping together, Rene finally loses romantic and sexual interest in O. Surprisingly, where before the thought of losing Rene’s “love” had driven her to extremes of panic or despair, O accepts this. Love is not something a subject gives or feels, but an impersonal affect that traverses among the pack, of which O is a part. At this stage Sir Stephen sends O to the estate of a woman called Anne-Marie. There, O is administered brutal whippings by other women, and consents to be branded with Sir Stephen’s insignia, as well as pierced through the labia, the holes of which contain two weighty stainless-steel rings that clang between her legs. When she returns from Anne-Marie’s, O shows Jacqueline the rings, who is at first horrified and then curious about Roissy. Eventually, both Jacqueline and her sister, Natalie, express an overt interest in visiting Roissy. Masochism in *Story of O* is, in this sense, contagious, rather than hereditary. The couplings of O and Rene, and O and Sir Stephen, or O and Jacqueline, are continually expanded in the forming of an amorphous and shifting pack that is O, Sir Stephen, Rene, Jacqueline, her sister Natalie, the valets and other men at Roissy, the women at Anne-Marie’s and any other number of other bodies that come and go. It is from within the “stone walls of the cell” that Aury writes: “free

this unknown creature whom we have kept locked up”, and: “it passes from one to another, from one age to another, from one country to another, it assumes one name or another” (1971, p. 12). In *Story of O*, the becoming-pack of masochism passes “from one to the other” like the cat-of-nine tails that swings from the hands of Sir Stephen, Rene, the valets, or any other who occasions to lash O.

While it is a mass of human bodies that are engaged in a becoming-pack, in both *Story of O* and *Venus in furs*, as the forming of the packs are more firmly constituted, so too are the inhuman aspects of O and of Severin/Gregor exaggerated: “You are whatever I want you to be, a man, a thing, an animal” exclaims Wanda (Masoch, 1991, p. 222), while O reflects: “Yes! thank God, she was no longer free. But she was light, a nymph on clouds, a fish in water, lost in happiness” (Réage, 1965, p. 91).

In the final pages of *Story of O*, O is prompted to choose a mask to wear to a party for someone called the “commander” (p. 191). The masks are “sparrow-hawk, falcon, owl, fox, lion, bull: nothing but animal masks, but scaled to the size of the human head” (p. 190). O chooses an owl mask, and she is presented in it at the party, with the addition of a leash. At the party none of the guests attempt to talk to her, “as though she were a real owl, deaf to human language, and dumb” (p. 195). “Was she then of stone or wax, or rather some creature from another world, and did they think it pointless to speak to her? Or didn’t they dare?” (p. 196). O’s becoming-animal and becoming-owl is not an imitation but a plus value; she chooses “the one she thought transformed her most and was also most natural”, “no doubt because it was composed of tan and tawny feathers whose color blended beautifully with her tan” (p. 191). What follows are two succinct but alternate endings. In the first, O returns to the château where she is abandoned by Sir Stephen. In the second, seeing that Sir Stephen plans to leave her, O says she would prefer to die. Sir Stephen gives his consent [3].

With the introduction of the owl mask, another member of the literary assemblage of masochism is introduced. In the interview with de St. Jorre, Aury attributes the owl mask to a painting by the famous Argentinian Italian artist Leonor Fini (1994). Fini’s work often depicted beings made up of both human and inhuman components, such as in her 1941 painting *The Shepherdess of the sphinxes*, which depicts a female shepherd surrounded by half-woman, half-cat beings, or the 1946 *Portrait of a woman with Acanthus leaves*, a painting of a woman whose body is part-human, part-plant. Fini was also very interested in masks, and she created a series of them from natural materials such as feathers, fur, and cotton, including one of an owl. Like Aury, Fini was interested in costumes, inhuman life, and the mutability of the human subject. Aury’s inclusion of Fini’s owl mask also demonstrates masochism’s general tendencies to indulge in animal materials. Krafft-Ebing claims that a “partiality for furs, velvet, and feathers is very frequent” among masochists, expressing dissatisfaction at the explanation that such things are coveted because they belong to royalty (2012, p. 185). Such materials appear frequently throughout *Story of O* in the form of whalebone bodices, leather collars and bracelets, and fur rugs and ottomans.

Through masochism, O experiences a “jubilation in the loss of both power and ego” (MacCormack, 2023, p. 144) that reaches beyond human experience and perception, challenging the “false Darwinian progression that places humans at the top” (Adams, 2014, p. 28). It is through this joyous loss of power and ego that one would be amiss not to also call pleasurable that O enters into a “becoming-animal” and a “becoming-pack”. It might, at first, seem natural to argue that O seeks her own reflection in mirrors to anchor or “freeze” her own subjectivity, which is under constant threat of becoming freed and disappearing into the pack. In contrast, O seeks her reflection because it affirms her becoming-animal—the removal of perception and experience from the subjectivity of the human body. In the becoming-animal and becoming-pack of masochism, pleasure is not “deferred”, “delayed” or “denied”, not the “affectation of the subject”, it is not “the only way for persons to find themselves in a desire that exceeds them” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 156). Masochistic desire is multidirectional and contagious when it circulates among the pack or assemblage, constituting an immanence of desire that can never be “discharged” or “silenced” by pleasure. Pleasure can never “arrive”, rather, it continues to circulate in the pleasurable forming of an amorphous and shifting pack or ++++ that rushes towards a “becoming-imperceptible”. In the masochistic forming of a pack there is not only a “becoming-x” but a contagious and unstoppable and expansive + + + +, a pleasurable “becoming anyone” and a “becoming everything”. The masochist reaches beyond the human towards a “pure multiplicity” that is also always a pleasurable “change in nature”.

Notes

[1] We might take the terms “kleptomaniac” and “shopaholic” and consider them in the context of the values of a capitalist society. Despite the two sharing similar symptoms, the latter is considered an impulse control mental health disorder, while the former is considered a crime. However, “stealing” is not what it is called when corporations pay their workers the legal minimum wage despite a huge excess of profits. That is called a “business plan” or “business model”.

[2] Most suspect the person behind the pseudonym Sabine d’Estrée to be Richard Seaver, a well-known publisher and translator who worked at Grove Press at the time they published the new edition of *Story of O*.

[3] The two alternate endings of *Story of O* generate more questions than I can properly explore in this essay. Is O’s choice to die when she is abandoned by Sir Stephen contradictory to my thesis of the becoming-pack and becoming-imperceptible of masochism? If “becoming imperceptible is Life, ‘without cessation and condition’ attaining to a cosmic and spiritual lapping”, what is death, and particularly suicide (Deleuze, 1997, p. 26)?

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