Suspended Time: The Speculative Mythology of the Death Drive

There is a well-known equivocation in Freud’s treatment of drive, and in particular of what he describes as its “unbound” or “freely mobile” character. In what sense precisely is the drive “unbound”? Freud often hesitates between an understanding of the death drive as a destructive force or energy, on the one hand, and on the other a purely mental or even mythical construction, with no energetic or substantial manifestation, that must be understood solely as a matter of fantasy. Both have a privileged relationship to the perversions.

Some of Freud’s earliest explorations of the death drive are in relation to sadism, in which he sees the best evidence of its operation. It gives rise to what is probably the most influential conception of the drive, its substantialization as a destructive “energy” or as a perpetual motion—for example, the thermodynamic representation of the drive that we find in the works of Sade himself, where it is figured as a constant energy that is without cause, self-sustaining, and not subject to entropy or loss: an energy pulsing through the world it lays to waste.

In his later writings, however, Freud stresses that this substantialization of the death drive tends to obscure a more profound understanding of the drive as immaterial, not given, and therefore presentable or knowable only as a formal or mythical construction. In Civilization and its Discontents (1930), Freud appears to distance himself from the terms in which he had first theorized the death drive in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. There he had postulated that in addition to “the instinct to preserve living substance and to join it into ever larger units”—the province of the life drives, or Eros—“there must exist another, contrary drive seeking to dissolve those units and to bring them back to their primaevial, inorganic state”: the death drive (77). Their concurrent or mutually opposing action would then explain the phenomena of life. Yet Freud now acknowledges that the attempt to isolate the death drive or make manifest its operations introduced a number of intractable problems. “It was not easy,” he concedes,

to demonstrate the activities of this supposed death [drive]. The manifestations of Eros were conspicuous and noisy enough. It might be assumed that the death [drive] operated silently within the organism toward its dissolution, but that, of course, was no proof. A more fruitful idea was that a portion of the [drive] is diverted towards the external world and comes to light as [a drive] of aggressiveness and destructiveness. In this way the drive itself could be pressed into the service of Eros, in that the organism was destroying some other thing, whether animate or inanimate, instead of destroying its own self. At the same time one can suspect from this example that the two kinds of instinct seldom—perhaps never—appear in isolation from each other, but are alloyed with each other in varying and very different proportions and so become unrecognizable to our judgment. In sadism, long since known to us as a component instinct of sexuality,
we should have before us a particularly strong alloy of this kind between trends of love and the destructive instinct; while its counterpart, masochism, would be a union between destructiveness directed inwards and sexuality—a union which makes what is otherwise an imperceptible trend into a conspicuous and tangible one. (77-78)

While the death drive works to dissolve units of living substance and return them to an inorganic state, it is not itself an object of direct empirical observation but is known only by its effects. A “portion” of the death drive “becomes visible” in sadism, “coming to light” as a drive to aggressivity and destruction; yet it is perceptible only on the condition of being “pressed into the service of Eros,” and therefore presented in the already compromised form of an impure “alloy” or compound.

The link between sadistic destructiveness and the death drive becomes even more tenuous after the publication of “The Economic Problem in Masochism” (1924) where Freud finally embraces once and for all the postulate of a “primary masochism” that would logically predate sadism. He now understands sadistic destructiveness not as a manifestation of the death drive, but as a form of defense in which the mortifying effect of the death drive would be turned outward or deflected onto other objects—and thus as a mode of cathectic.

What then can be said of the death drive in its uncathected, unconverted form—which implicitly has nothing to do either with destructiveness or with mobility? Is there a way of “making visible” or “giving voice” to the death drive that is not merely a reduction of its non-empirical or supersensible character to a sensible manifestation or a mode of cathectic?

In a lecture from 1933, Freud concludes that because the death drive operates in “silence”—and therefore cannot be given in psychic life, even in the unconscious—we can speak of it only in speculative or mythical terms. “The theory of the drives,” he writes, “is so to speak our mythology. The drives are mythical entities, magnificent in their indefiniteness.” This is why Gilles Deleuze understands Freud’s account of the death drive not merely as a description of what he observes in the clinic, but as a foray into “speculative philosophy”: an attempt to locate a “real” that is not given empirically, and that therefore demands to be constructed. This “silent” or “imperceptible” operation of the drive would exceed the frame not only of energetics, but of time: the mortal temporality of organic life (where death is the telos of all life), but also what Freud refers to in Beyond the Pleasure Principle as the “abstract notion of time.” He understands it as a perception on the part of the Pept-Cs system of its own method of working: and thus, implicitly, as a mode of defense against the primary processes and the drive.

Deleuze’s own work on masochism offers a novel approach to this problem: one that doesn’t render the perversions obsolete, but reminds us of their special contribution to the understanding of the death drive precisely as ungiven. The ungivenness of the death drive, and the corresponding need to substantiate or construct it, is arguably the central preoccupation of perversion and its most important contribution to the field of psychoanalysis. Deleuze understands perverse fantasy as staging a “demonstration” of what cannot be represented, but a demonstration that need not entail a positive substantialization.
He proposes that the fetish, and more specifically the “freezing of time” it effects, allows for the construction and formalization of the death drive. His solution is at the very least paradoxical. For while it is true that the fetish excels precisely at “making visible what is invisible,” we usually think of it as substituting an illusory positivity for an unbearable negativity or lack. Freud, for example, understood fetishism as a “disavowal of castration,” in which the unwelcome discovery that the mother lacks a penis is repudiated by the fetish that takes its place. Deleuze’s approach, while it doesn’t necessarily contradict Freud’s, takes a different tack. It concerns the problem of construction, or the nature of the real that fetishism opposes to reality; it therefore considers what the logic of perversion seeks to illuminate or make visible, beyond what it refuses or disavows. This “visibility” is not sensible, but linked to the purely mental sphere of imagination and myth. What it involves is not the substitution of something for nothing, a supplement for a lack, but what he calls the priority of the “ideal” over reality. Key to this reading is Deleuze’s insight that the fetish actually belongs to the complex of masochism, with its elaborate ritual stagings. This in turn changes the stakes of the fetish, and links it to the death drive that masochism seeks to bring forth and uphold.

In *Coldness and Cruelty*, his remarkable reading of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs*, Deleuze argues that masochism is defined by the pursuit of “supersensualism,” and not—as one might suppose—of a quest for unbounded sensuality. Severin, the novel’s protagonist, seeks to debase himself before a cold and exacting mistress whose whip would deliver him from the sensual world he has come to abhor. He likens himself to the martyrs of old, and takes as a motto for his doctrine the words of Mephistopheles to Faust: “Thou sensual, supersensual libertine, a little girl can lead thee by the nose.” Deleuze notes that *übersinnlich* in Goethe’s text does not mean “supersensitive”—in the sense of “exceedingly sensual”—but rather “‘supersensual,’ ‘supercarnal,’ in accordance with theological tradition, where *Sinnlichkeit* denotes the flesh, *sensualitas*” (21). On the face of it, this claim is counter-intuitive. The masochistic scenario seems to aim at an intensification of sensuality, notably through the sensations of pleasure and pain. Even in Sacher-Masoch’s novel, Severin appears to swing from masochism to sadism, or between the pleasure taken in receiving pain to the pleasure taken in delivering it.

But while Deleuze admits that the novel is structured by a series of dialectical reversals, he contends that it is not the Hegelian dialectic that holds sway here, but a Platonic “dialectic of the imagination” (22) that aims at the “supersensualism” of the Ideal. What it expresses is not the interdependence of sadism and masochism, therefore, but their antinomy: the masochist’s refusal of the sensuality of which sadism is merely one manifestation. For Deleuze, masochism aims at a specific “freezing” or suspension of the “pendulum swing” between two poles, identified with two different modes of sensuality: on one side the hedonistic ideal of the Greek woman or Aphrodite, who dedicates herself solely to the pursuit of pleasure, and on the other the tortures of the sadist. In suspending the movement between these poles, the masochist seeks to identify a specific *supersensualism* that is pursued in—and also beyond—sensual experience.

Thematically it is expressed by the ideal of “coldness,” which in freezing the warmth of sensuality allows a specific severity to emerge. The Greek ideal is transformed into the masochistic ideal through what Deleuze calls “the catastrophe of the *glacial epoch*, which accounts for both the repression of sensuality and the triumphant rise of severity” (52-3). The
Ideal is thus “the specific freezing point, the point at which idealism is realized” (55). At stake is not some kind of “Goldilocks” principle, however—identifying a point that is neither too hot nor too cold, but “just right”—but rather the pursuit of the coldness between hot and hot. Only at this “freezing point” can the masochistic ideal of the cold mother exist; only here does the maternal phallus, which has no sensual existence, reveal itself in its timeless eternity, in the form of frozen images, impersonal traits, and inanimate objects.

The first and third terms are thus “the limits between which the second oscillates in its precarious splendor and perfection,” in which “the fantasy finds what it needs” (52-53). If that splendor is marked as “precarious,” however, it is because it proves impossible to locate in reality. In Venus and Furs, Wanda is consistently incapable of animating the ideal she is called upon to incarnate. The Wanda we meet at the start of the novel is a fickle Aphrodite, the Greek ideal of the woman of pleasure. But after Severin installs her in the role of his Venus, he complains that she has become a sadist, and not the cold mistress he desired. As an excess of sensuality, Wanda’s sadism compromises the masochistic ideal by swinging right past the “freezing point” and suspended scenes that are its aim toward a “vulgarity” in delivering abuse that has nothing in common with the icy discipline the masochist seeks. The function of the masochistic contract is to constrain or “force” the manifestation of this ideal by obliging the partner to play a specific and highly scripted role, or to animate very precise traits or gestures (for example, wearing a fur or brandishing a whip). It therefore aims to force into reality, to realize or make manifest, what in fact has no discernible reality or empirical support. Hence the essential relation between masochism and art: the statues and paintings that sustain Severin’s fantasy of a Venus in furs, but also the literary works of Sacher-Masoch himself, which give form to the masochistic ideal he consistently found lacking in real life. In his novels this frozen ideal is identified not only with the marble statue of Venus that Severin worships by moonlight, but with the “cold steppe” of Mother Russia, a perpetually frozen ice field virtually devoid of life.

Why the Russian Steppe? Sacher-Masoch was born to a noble family in present-day Ukraine, and was a passionate supporter of the pan-Slavic movement that sought to liberate his homeland from the control of the Austrian Empire. A recurring theme in his work is the dream of an agrarian communism in which a new race of men would be formed through its hard labor on the soils of the motherland. Deleuze relates it both to his nationalistic pan-Slavism and to his masochistic fantasy of a cold mother of the Steppe, since the aim of each is to announce the birth of a “new man”: in his words, “a deep bond is forged between the commune, the law of the commune embodied in the oral mother, and the man of the commune, who can only be born by being reborn of the oral mother” (95-96), through a parthenogenesis in which the father plays no role (100).

In contrast, Sacher-Masoch’s new man is born—or reborn—from the frozen steppe itself, whose icy coldness is not merely a symbol of Slavic fortitude, but a cooling force that promises to freeze the sensuality right out of him—and so purge any traces of the father. In Deleuze’s words, “sensuality is disavowed and no longer exists in its own right; thus Sacher-Masoch can announce the birth of the new man ‘devoid of sexual love’” (52).
This is a picture of the frozen body of Sir John Torrington, the British explorer who in 1845 lead the Franklin Expedition into the Arctic. The disappearance of his team three years later became a huge news story in Europe, and spawned a number of gothic adventure stories during the period when Sacher-Masoch was writing. The graves of Torrington and his companions were finally discovered in 2014, buried under a sheet of ice that prevented their bodies from decomposing. In this photo, Torrington’s eerily intact body is seen emerging from its shroud of ice as if from a birth membrane. Might we see in this frozen rebirth a figure of Sacher-Masoch’s “new man,” who disappears into the oral mother so as to be reborn from her alone?

It is in the context of this argument that Deleuze introduces the role of the fetish: not as a compensation for what the mother lacks, but as a support for this supersensual ideal. Let me describe briefly the singularity of his reading, and its importance for the theorization of the death drive.

Deleuze follows Freud in affirming that the fetish is the “image or substitute of the female phallus,” and thus “the means by which we deny that a woman lacks a penis.” More importantly, though, it functions as what he calls a “protective and idealizing neutralization.” That is, “the belief in a female phallus is itself experienced as a protest of the ideal against the real; it remains suspended or neutralized in the ideal, the better to shield itself against the painful awareness of reality.” It follows, Deleuze writes, that “disavowal should perhaps be understood as the point of departure of an operation that consists…in radically contesting the validity of that which is: it suspends belief in and neutralizes the given in such a way that a new horizon opens up beyond the given and in place of it” (31).

In other words, the fetish substitutes not for a “real” penis, but for the maternal phallus that does not exist in reality: and that for that very reason lays claim to being the ideal or “true” phallus (the one that never loses its erection, never fails). In the words of one perverse patient,
cited by analyst Serge Andrén, a woman is superior to a man because she never loses her erection; only a woman who does not actually “have” a penis can never lose it.\textsuperscript{14} In Platonic terms, we might say that the maternal phallus is the “ideal form,” the male penis its “copy.” The fetish therefore opposes the Ideal—the maternal phallus that does not “exist”—to the real: the male penis that, by virtue of “existing,” is necessarily secondary with respect to the ideal.

The attainment of this “specific freezing point” thus serves two aims. The first is defensive, where the suspension of movement has the effect of making time stand still—and so freezing the threat of castration in its tracks. Because “the fetishist’s choice of a fetish is determined by the last object he saw as a child before becoming aware of the missing penis,” the “constant return to this… point of departure enables him to validate the existence of the organ that is in dispute.” The fetish “is therefore not a symbol at all,” Deleuze writes, “but as it were a frozen, arrested, two-dimensional image, a photograph to which one returns repeatedly to exorcise the dangerous consequences of movement, the harmful discoveries that result from exploration; it represents the last point at which it is still possible to believe” (31). (We might recall as well Freud’s reading of the Medusa’s head, where being frozen in place or turned to stone is at once the effect of castration and its defiance, inasmuch it turns the body into an erect penis.)

But the second and more important function of this frozen arrest is to elucidate another reality: that of the maternal phallus, certainly (expressed here by the fantasy of a parthenogenetic birth from the ice), but in and beyond it the reality of the death drive itself.\textsuperscript{15} Recall that for Freud, \textit{inanimacy} is the form in which the death drive is most often expressed in its ungiveness. The cold mother identified with the “catastrophe of the Ice Age” sustains not only a certain maternal ideal, therefore, but the suspension, timelessness and inanimacy of the death drive itself. The relationship between the mother and the death drive is already implied in Sacher-Masoch’s three feminine types, in which Deleuze sees three fundamental mother images: the primitive, uterine mother; the Oedipal mother, figure of the beloved, who becomes linked with the sadistic father as victim or as accomplice; and the oral mother, the mother of the steppe, who nurtures and brings death (55). Freud, he reminds us, found the same trinity in the figure of the Three Fates: “The mother herself, the beloved who is chosen after her pattern, and finally the Mother Earth who receives him again… the third of the Fates alone, the silent goddess of Death, will take him into her arms.”\textsuperscript{16}

Indeed, the “supersensualism in and beyond sensual experience” that Deleuze reads as the object of Severin’s quest might even be a definition of the death drive, as Deleuze reads it. As a drive to the inorganic, the death drive is fundamentally opposed to sensuality, and specifically to pleasure and pain. Hence Deleuze understands Freud’s account of the death drive as the “beyond of the pleasure principle” not in terms of the transgression of a boundary or limit (for example, going “beyond pleasure” into something painful or traumatic), but as a foray into speculative philosophy: an attempt to identify the transcendent principle or “higher law” of the pleasure principle, the supersensual law of its sensual manifestations.

In stressing its link with the death drive, the perversions reveal that the fantasy of the maternal phallus cannot simply be understood as the child’s response to the anatomical makeup of women, and especially to the lack or “castration” it is supposed to perceive there. In other
words, the reason the mother is so important to the perversions (and indeed to the human as such) is that the child first encounters the death drive in the mother’s body. It is thus the relation of the feminine to the drive that the fetish attempts to stage or formalize, and not merely the presence or absence of the expected penis. As Freud himself suggests in his account of the “three mothers,” the mother (and more broadly the feminine) has always served as a figuration of the drive in its unbounded quality. In offering the maternal phallus as a figuration of the death drive, therefore, the specific contribution of the perversions is to reveal not that woman is castrated, but rather that the drive (in the woman) is not castrated. That is, the woman embodies the excess in drive, and not its lack, finitude, or negation: a lack that in man is symbolized by the phallus that inscribes the logic of castration in the body as the loss of a part of the living being to the Other of language and of culture.

Because the perversions apprehend the maternal phallus at the most fundamental level (where the drive itself is at stake, and not “woman”), they are also able to render it “cosmic,” to sense the movement of the drive in the universe, and not to lodge it at the heart of the family unit as the object of a specific complaint or appeal. The corollary is that the maternal phallus cannot simply be conflated with the child’s own mother, or for that matter with any human female. Sade and Sacher-Masoch both find it “in the real,” where it is figured as a prehuman or extrahuman reality. It is no longer the maternal body as such that is primary, but the bringing forth of a “primary nature” where the drive reigns supreme in its “divine latency.”

Deleuze explicates this logic through reference to Pierre Klossowski’s distinction between “primary” and “secondary” nature in his classic study of Sade. “Secondary nature” (or what we usually just call nature) is the sphere of organic life. “Primary nature,” on the other hand, has nothing to do with the nature that is the object of the biological sciences (the environment in which organic life unfolds), but names instead a supersensual or transcendental reality to which the fantasy alone gives access: a “higher” or “superior” nature of which empirical nature would be only a pale shadow or vulgar substitute. The biological or “uterine” mother (the mother who gives birth) is the representative of “secondary nature,” while “primary nature” is identified with the reign of the “oral” or “cold” mother, the mother who does not properly speaking “exist,” but whose manifestations are mythical, formal, and inhuman. If secondary nature is phenomenal, organic, and alive (and therefore mortal), primary nature is noumenal and inorganic—but also “eternal.” Precisely because it is not “alive,” it is not subject to dissolution or death. The aim of the perverse demonstration is to establish the supremacy of “primary nature” over the secondary nature the real mother embodies. This is why human mothers are conspicuously absent from the works of Sacher-Masoch, and why the Sadean libertine always conspires to torture or kill the human mother: viewing her as an impostor who substitutes a vulgar “engendering”—the biological reproduction of human life—for the mother of primary nature (Sade calls her “our universal mother”) who alone creates and destroys.

Klossowski’s account of primary and secondary nature resonates with Freud’s distinction between the primary and secondary processes, or between unconscious processes and those at work in consciousness or waking life. “Primary nature” is thus identified with the death drive itself, or what Freud describes as the “unbound” or “freely mobile” energies of the primary processes. The secondary processes, on the other hand, attempt to bind the unbound drive energy of the primary processes, to anchor or cathect it.
“Freezing” the Drive

In the space that remains I would like to think about how this argument allows us to understand the differences between *disavowal* and *repression*, and therefore the very different strategies of the pervert and the neurotic with respect to the drive—and, ultimately, to the problematic of time that Freud identifies with the way in which the secondary processes attempt to cathect or bind the drive.

Deleuze’s claim that “freezing” and “suspension” function here as figurations of the death drive—and not simply its repudiation or deflection—is at the very least counter-intuitive, especially in relation to more familiar treatments of the same topos in psychoanalytic theory. We tend to identify “freezing” with the repression of the drive, and more specifically with the function of what Lacan calls the imaginary. In the theory of the mirror stage, for example, the identification with the external, alienated mirror-image that founds the ego is understood as an arrest or cathexis of the drive, in which the fragmented body of the drive or *corps morcelé* is repressed in favor of what Lacan characterizes as the “armor of an alienating identity.” He describes it explicitly as a “freezing” of the “turbulent movements” that animate the subject from within, associated with the drives and their disorganizing effects. In Lacan’s words, “the total form of his body, by which the subject anticipates the maturation of his power in a mirage, is given to him only as a *Gestalt*, that is, in an exteriority in which…it appears to him as the contour that freezes it and in a symmetry that reverses it, in opposition to the turbulent movements with which the subject feels he animates it” (76). Hence the mirror image both “symbolizes the I’s mental permanence” and “prefigures its alienating destination” (76), marking “his entire mental development with its rigid structure” (78).

Slavoj Žižek, glossing Lacan’s account of the mirror stage, writes that “the feature to be emphasized here is that we are dealing with a kind of ‘freeze of time’: the flow of life is suspended, the Real of the dynamic living process is replaced by a ‘dead’, immobilized image—Lacan himself uses the metaphor of cinema projection, and compares the ego to the fixed image which the spectator perceives when the reel gets jammed.” Extending the analogy with photography, Žižek claims that “what we are dealing with here is the *negative link between visibility and movement*: in terms of its original phenomenological status, movement equals blindness; it blurs the contours of what we perceive: in order for us to perceive the object clearly, it must be frozen, immobilized…[since] it is only immobility that provides a firm visible existence” (108-109, my emphasis). Žižek compares this immobilizing fixation to what happens in fetishism, where the adoption of the fetish should be understood as an attempt to freeze time, and so arrest the movement leading up to the painful discovery of the mother’s castration. Titled “Fetishism and its Vicissitudes,” his essay is actually an attempt to sketch a generalized theory of fetishism, understood primarily as a logic of fixation and substitution. In this argument, the identification with the mirror image and the adoption of the fetish are understood as more or less analogous in their way of functioning.

For Lacan the theory of the mirror stage is not a generalized logic, however, but an attempt to explain the mechanism of *repression* in the psychic structure of neurosis: a
mechanism that has no relevance for the perversions. In Lacan’s argument, the function of the frozen mirror image with which the ego identifies both anticipates and lays the foundation for the function of the signifier in the neuroses, to which the obsessional in particular will later appeal in an attempt to repress the drive (as in the fundamental dictum that “a signifier is what represents the subject for another signifier,” where “representation” is synonymous with repression). Žižek draws on this argument when he notes that “in contrast to humans, some animals perceive only objects which are moving, and are thus unable to see us if we are absolutely frozen—what we have here is the opposition between pre-symbolic real life, which sees only movement, and the symbolized gaze, which can see only ‘mortified,’ petrified objects” (109n). Frozenness is not of this world, it does not belong to the logic of life. Where then does it come from, and what makes it possible? For Žižek, following Lacan, it would result from the deadening effect of the signifier, which links mortification or petrification to the symbolic—and thus to the logic of repression.22

Fetishism cannot be assimilated to repression, however. If the latter involves an appeal to the alienating or “deadening” effects of the signifier, something very different is at stake in the logic of disavowal. In his essay on fetishism, Freud observes that the little boy’s refusal of the mother’s castration actually involves two distinct operations. “If we wish to differentiate between what happens to the idea as distinct from the affect,” he writes, “we can restrict ‘repression’ to relate to the affect; the correct word for what happens to the idea is then ‘disavowal’ [Verleugnung].”23 Repression concerns affect, more specifically the castration anxiety provoked by the sight of the female genitals. To say that this affect can be “repressed” is to say that it can be represented by means of a signifier or image: for example, the multiplication of penis symbols that invariably signifies castration. Conversely, the “idea” is not represented by a signifier, but instead figured, posited, and supported by the fetish as thing. This “idea” is not castration anxiety, or even the perception of the mother as castrated, but rather the reality of the maternal phallus itself. While Freud suggests that castration anxiety and its repression are common to all men, neurotic or perverse, the “idea” of the maternal phallus is upheld by the pervert alone. The fetish does not “signify” the maternal phallus, we might say, but figures it. It thus allows for a different visibility than the one supported by the signifier.

If repression seeks to halt the drive (by putting a stable image in its place), disavowal exalts it. If repression freezes to block or negate, to limit the drive or stop in its tracks, disavowal freezes to sustain, preserve and protect: as in a cryogenic freezing that does not kill, but indefinitely postpones the moment of death. Deleuze writes of Sacher-Masoch’s fiction that masochistic coldness represents the freezing point, the point of dialectical transmutation, a divine latency corresponding to the catastrophe of the Ice Age. But under the cold remains a supersensual sentimentality buried under the ice and protected by fur; this sentimentality radiates in turn through the ice as the generative principle of new order, a specific wrath and a specific cruelty. The coldness is both protective milieu and medium, cocoon and vehicle: it protects supersensual sentimentality as inner life, and expresses it as external order, as wrath and severity (52).

The frozen masochistic ideal of primary nature consists in remaining as close to completely frozen as possible, so as not to be depleted or dissipated in cathexis. Hence the importance of the
Ice Age, and of the frozen steppe that figures its persistence. In the permafrost of the Siberian steppe, perfectly preserved creatures from previous eras (woolly mammoths, the now extinct steppe bison) can be found alongside those of the present age. Because the ice never melts, the vestiges of this earlier era still persist today even if they do not “exist” in a vital or sensual way (in other words, they persist precisely because they are dead, preserved by death.) The frozen steppe figures a death that is not entropic, a death from which the very possibility of decomposition has been eliminated (against the usual idea of death as a breaking down of organic life, destined to become fuel for other organisms).

In its resistance to decomposition, the steppe might even function as a figure of the unconscious: because it is timeless, it also loses nothing with the passage of time. In this sense the frozen steppe offers an interesting counterpoint to Freud’s most famous image of the unconscious, the superimposed archeological strata of ancient and modern-day Rome. While that image is better for evoking the status of memories, representations, and the signifying articulation (or what Lacan sometimes describes as a “cultured” or “citified” unconscious\textsuperscript{24}), the frozen steppe evokes the “unbound,” the mental representations invested by the drive itself.

Unbound: The “Cold Energy” of Primary Nature

Deleuze makes an important contribution to this problem when he suggests that the “specific freezing point” at stake in the masochistic scenario not only refuses fixation or cathexis, but at the same time—and even more paradoxically—works to contest the energetic myth of the drive in favor of something very different.\textsuperscript{25} It suggests that the suspension or freezing of movement that fetishism effects may actually be a privileged expression of what Freud describes as the “unbound” or “free” energy of the death drive. Here it is important to recall that Freud’s distinction between “free energy” and “bound energy” is taken from his colleague Josef Breuer, who in turn draws on the work of physicist Hermann von Helmholtz on the degradation of energy in thermodynamic systems.\textsuperscript{26} As summarized by Jean Laplanche, the upshot of Helmholtz’s work on the Carnot-Clausius principle is to show that despite the initial definition of energy as ‘the capacity to produce work’ and despite the principle of the conservation of energy, what is conserved in a given system—its total internal energy—is not, for all that, able to be indefinitely reconverted into work. Whence the distinction between two types of energy whose sum constitutes the internal energy: energy that can be reconverted into work and is ‘usable’ (Maxwell), and energy that cannot be reconverted into work and is ‘degraded’ in the form of heat. It is in order to designate these two types of energy that Helmholtz proposes the terms \textit{free energy} and \textit{bound energy}: ‘It seems certain to me that we must distinguish, within chemical processes as well, between that portion of the forces of affinity capable of being freely transformed into other kinds of work, and that portion that can only \textit{become manifest} in the form of heat. To abbreviate, I shall call these two portions of energy: free energy and bound energy. For a given system…the free energy (freely usable energy) tends constantly to diminish, whereas the bound (nonreconvertible) energy
If “bound” energy is degraded in the form of heat, “unbound energy” remains fully usable or convertible; but it also corresponds to the absence of heat, and thus to the absence of any degradation of energy.

When Deleuze proposes with the image of the “pendulum swing” that the masochistic scenario seeks to eludicate a supersensual ideal suspended between the two poles of sensuality and sadism—and thus the coldness or “specific freezing point” between “hot” and “hot”—he suggests that both of these poles would represent a “binding” of the unbound energy of the death drive as “heat,” or as a specific kind of “discharge” or “release.” In contrast, the image of “freezing” suggests that the masochist strives to maintain the “unbound energy” of the death drive precisely as unbound, and not to discharge it. In preserving and protecting the drive in its pure potentiality, he would seek to discharge as little energy as possible, to lose nothing to “heat.”

This suggests that Sacher-Masoch’s “coldness” is not merely a metaphor for the mother’s refusal of sensuality—her “severity” or “rigor”—but denotes the specific way she figures drive energy as “unbound.” The non-castration of the mother figures the “potential energy” of the drive, as we see in the pervert’s insight that the maternal phallus is the ideal or “true” phallus: because it is not subject to detumescence, its energy cannot be “spent” in orgasm or discharged in ejaculation.

Deleuze’s investment in distinguishing masochism from sadism, which is one of the core theses of this book, turns precisely upon the distinction between “freezing” or stillness and the fantasy of “perpetual motion” that he identifies with Sade. Although Sade’s account of drive energy as “perpetual” or “constant” seems to imply that it is not subject to entropy or loss, his attempt to figure that energy thermodynamically actually undercuts this claim. As Jean Laplanche observes, the very principle of the constancy of energy implies either an influx or a subtraction of energy as needed to maintain the constant. (If one is driving a car and attempting to maintain a constant speed, for example, it is necessary sometimes to step on the accelerator, sometimes to break; this alternation between the addition and subtraction of energy is essential to the idea of a constant, even if we tend to forget it). In contrast, the “absolute zero” of the “ice age,” the “frozen ideal” of the masochist, implies neither.

In the Freud citation with which I began (which claims that the death drive “comes to light” as sadism), the becoming perceptible of the drive—for example as a destructiveness directed against objects—is also its cathexis or dissipation. “Free energy,” on the other hand, is not expressed as heat or movement. Its “unbound energy” relies upon what might be characterized as a mathematical rather than physical understanding of energy, which is virtual, immanent, and purely formal.

This mathematical or “cold” energy might actually provide the ultimate figuration of the death drive, as Sacher-Masoch himself intuits. Earlier I suggested that “primary nature” is not the nature of the biologist (the organic environment), but a transcendent reality: a “higher” law or superior reality of which empirical nature would be only a partial and imperfect representation.
Interestingly, this “higher law” is also a good definition of mathematics: not only in philosophical Platonism, but within modern physics, where it is understood as formalizing the fundamental laws of physical reality. Accordingly, the theoretical priority of mathematics within physics might be understood as providing an especially compelling construction of “primary nature.” Like the death drive in Deleuze’s reading, it functions as a kind of “law beyond all laws,” as the supersensual law of a sensual nature.

This paper is related to a book I’m now working on, Libertine Mathematics: Perversions of the Linguistic Turn. Its guiding hypothesis is that the turn to mathematical formalization on the part of some contemporary philosophers should be understood not only as an attempt to construct an unverifiable or non-intuitive real, but more specifically, in some cases (and in particular in the work of Alain Badiou), as an attempt to formalize the drive itself. In addition to Lacan himself, who often thinks of mathematical formalization as the horizon of psychoanalytic theory (especially in his late works), Deleuze is a figure who both foresees this development and makes it possible. One of the things I’m interested in is the relationship between this turn to formalization and the privileging of mathematics in perverse philosophy, and especially in the works of Sade, Casanova, Lautréamont, Sacher-Masoch and Mirbeau. The “coldness” of mathematics, and its alignment with a supersensual “primary nature,” is an important trope in these works, which Foucault, Deleuze, and Badiou have all emphasized in different ways. Badiou cites as one of the most important sources for his own mathematical ontology the decidedly mythical depiction of mathematics in the work of Lautréamont, where it is apostrophized as the “cold mother” of a “glacial,” post-human world that sounds very much like Sacher-Masoch’s “primary nature.”

Beyond the Pleasure Principle could be understood as Freud’s contribution to this genealogy, since it introduces for the first time a mathematical treatment of the drive commensurate with its supersensual or “mythical” character.

“Time, empty and out of joint...”

The distinction between repression and disavowal is at the same time a distinction between two different conceptions of time and temporality. The mirror stage, in Lacan’s words, “is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation” (78). It is forward-moving, aspirational, and teleological, a steady march toward the “mirage” of an eventually acquired control in which the signifier is called upon to colonize the real, to repress it, and so take its place. In contrast, the fetish is about the reversing of this forward momentum, the attempt to “return” to an earlier state that exalts not the ego, but the primordial prehistory of this alienation. It thus closely parallels Freud’s description of the drive itself, which he defines as “an urge, inherent in organic life, to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces; that is, it is a kind of organic elasticity, or, to put it another way, the expression of the inertia inherent in organic life.”

At stake is not a “fixation,” therefore, but a “return” to an earlier state. Freud’s invocation of an “organic elasticity” suggests not the “rigidity” of an alienating identification, which fixes or displaces once and for all, but rather a resistance to deformation that allows the drive to return to its initial state much like an elastic band that snaps back into position after being distended—or, for that matter, like the “suspensory belt” of Freud’s essay on fetishism: an elasticized garment that compresses the genitals of the wearer in such a way that it is impossible to determine.
whether she (or he) has a penis or not. It is an exemplary fetish because it “suspends” the opposition between “having” or “not having,” “yes” or “no,” by allowing these apparently mutually exclusive possibilities to coexist (208). While the suspensory belt as fetish certainly works to suspend or arrest castration, it does so in the mode of a return to a predifferentiated state, in which the phallus universally attributed to all beings would not yet be separated out into absence and presence by the advent of the signifier. Against the mirror stage, it can actually be understood as refusing the cathexis, binding or dissipation of the drive.

I want to suggest that the collapsing of time may be one way disavowal functions, and what distinguishes it from something like deferred action or Nachträglichkeit. In the latter case, the “cut” of castration retroactively imposes on what was witnessed a meaning it did not have originally. Or, in case of the little girls’ discovery of sexual difference, there is the immediate realization (Freud says she realizes “in a flash”) that she doesn’t have the penis and wants it. In both cases, there is kind of a “no return” temporality, that divides everything into a before and after (even with all of the complexity and ambivalence that Freud identifies in the “normal” attitude toward castration of the little boy).

In fetishism, on the other hand, this temporal demarcation is one of the things disavowed. As Freud emphasizes, it is not the whole story to say that the fetishist repudiates the knowledge that the mother is castrated. He knows it, but he also preserves alongside of this knowledge the previous belief. “Before” and “after” continue to coexist, as it were. (One way to put it would be to say that the two beliefs are related spatially, as contiguous to one another, rather than following one another in a temporal succession that would therefore render them mutually exclusive.) If time is merely a dimension of space, might we then say that its function is precisely to “space” that space, to break it up or divide it, by introducing negation or lack?

This very Heideggerian insight underscores something we often forget, namely that time belongs to the order of the signifier. The notion of “deferral” captures this very well: not only temporal deferral (putting off until later), but also what Derrida elaborates with the concept of différance: the deferral of presence that is the structural consequence of language, or of what he prefers to call “writing”: the violent spacing or division of being that is the consequence of the signifier. Like writing, the concept of time can be understood as a distancing, or even a negating, of the real.

Martin Buber, in his classic reading of the Mosaic law, suggests that the defining characteristic of early Judaism is its break with the worship of nature, a break that is symbolized by the gap introduced into the solar and lunar cycles of day and month by the commandment to honor the Sabbath day—which might be understood as introducing the concept of time as such. In his seminar on The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, Lacan develops this insight by suggesting that the regular consecration of every seventh day as a day of rest or non-activity “clearly introduces into human life the sign of a gap,” which will henceforth be associated with subjectivization. The subject emerges through the decompletion of the symbolic universe, through the positive addition to the cosmos of an instance of negation that interrupts or spaces out the real. This suggests that the “distance between the subject and das Ding” that Lacan understands as the condition of speech is temporal as well as spatial.
In contrast, fetishism seeks not only to “turn back the clock”—to undo the march of time and the negation of the real that it implies—but to assert the “timelessness” or “eternity” of the drive. Deleuze makes a remarkable contribution to this thesis when he writes—this time in *Difference and Repetition*—that “time empty and out of joint, with its rigorous formal and static order, its crushing unity and its irreversible series, is precisely the death instinct.” 34 What is “time empty and out of joint”? In his reading of Sacher-Masoch, Deleuze describes myth as a time in which “everything has already happened”:

This concentration of functions in the person of the good oral mother is one of the ways in which the father is cancelled out, and his parts and functions distributed among the three women….In short the three women constitute a symbolic order in which and through which the father is abolished in advance—for all time. This eternal, timeless supremacy of the mother can only be expressed in the language of myths, which is therefore essential to masochism: *everything has already happened*, and the entire action takes place between the mother images (63).

If “everything has already happened,” this also suggests that nothing happens, that nothing “takes place in”—or introduces a space into—what Deleuze characterizes as the “crushing unity” of a time out of joint.

**Mythology and Primary Nature**

How might these considerations inflect the problematic of myth? Deleuze notes that Sacher-Masoch was familiar with the work of with his contemporary J.J. Bachofen, the eminent ethnologist best known for his book *Mutterrecht* (literally, “Mother Law”), a masterpiece of perverse historiography that attempted to make the case for the primacy of maternal law in human history. Bachofen distinguished three eras in the evolution of humanity, which can easily be recognized in Sacher-Masoch’s three feminine types:

The first is the hetaeric or Aphroditic era, born in the lustful chaos of primeval swamps: woman’s relations with man were many and fickle, the feminine principle was dominant and the father was ‘Nobody’ (this phase, typified by the ruling courtesans of Asia, has survived in such institutions as temple prostitution). The second, or Demetrian era, dawned among the Amazons and established a strict gynocratic and agricultural order; the swamps were drained; the father or husband now acquired a certain status but he still remained under the dominion of the woman. Finally the patriarchal or Apollonian system established itself, matriarchy surviving in degenerate Amazonian or even Dionysian forms (52-53).

Bachofen’s thesis resonates suggestively with Freud’s own forays into the history of human civilization in *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*, where he advances that patriarchal forms of social existence were preceded by a very long matriarchate of manifestly perverse structure, defined by an alliance between the mother goddesses and the sons who serve them. 35
Freud often speaks of the “dark continent” of the feminine in relation to the Minoan-Mycenean civilization that came before that of ancient Greece, and that provided some of its most important myths. These include the Greek myths that figure most clearly the experience of the drives, including the legend of the dismembered god Dionysus and his destructive female celebrants, the Bacchae. Freud often identifies the Minoan-Mycenean civilization with a pre-symbolic or pre-Oedipal reality, noting that both “leave few traces” of their own but can be known only through their influence on the more lasting formations that have taken their place. It is in this connection that Freud introduces one of his most important meditations on the theme of the “oral mother” at the beginning of “Feminine Sexuality” (1931), hypothesizing that the little girl’s father-attachment is not primary, but a secondary phase in which she “takes refuge” from an earlier phase of mother-attachment, characterized by “the surprising, yet regular, dread of being killed (?) devoured) by the mother” (186).

The pre-symbolic, oral mother of the death drive is thus older than the father and his law: not only as a subject of myth, but in the experience of the child. This is because every child is born from the mother’s body, and encounters the drive there for the first time. For the child, this is the “first” thing, and predates any encounter with the signifier as a limitation or negation of the real: the *infans* is without speech, and therefore without any barrier to the drive. Mythology could therefore be understood as the projection of this experience “into the world,” into human history, where the human seeks confirmation of this “prior” moment. Myth attests to a longstanding matriarchal period before the patriarchy, and thus to the primacy of the mother in relation to the father and his law. It posits maternal rule as coming “before” mediation or lack, which enters the world only with the advent of the patriarchy. But it also places the matriarchate “outside of time,” the temporality or history that is introduced by the father and his word and that entails the loss and repression of that mythical origin. If for the pervert time must be “disavowed,” therefore, it is because time introduces the dimension of lack, or the severing of the mother/child dyad.

But while this logic is clear enough, I want to question its flip side, as well: namely, our tendency to relegate mythical thought to a historical past, and therefore to a moment in chronological time. It either describes a way of life that no longer exists (as in Bachofen’s depiction of the different ages of man), or it is identified with an “earlier” way of thinking that has now been rendered obsolete (for example by science).

When Freud says that drives are our myths, he brings the problematic of myth back into the here and now and makes it current again. At the same time, though, he often relies upon a temporal language—for example “regression,” “arrested development,” “fixation,” etc.—to talk about the perversions in particular, in a way that ties them to a “past” that is either cut off from or opposed to a normal development. Even as the perversions reveal the eternal relevance of myth, in other words, this revelation is called a “regression.” The pervert is someone who never outgrows his childhood, who remains stuck in the infancy of man. The same is true of the matriarchate that is identified specifically with perverse fantasy. Although Freud speaks of it as a historical reality, he invariably characterizes it as a period belonging to the distant past, that was supplanted by later developments.
While Bachoften and Freud associate the dominance of the mother with a past historical epoch, this epoch is made present in masochistic ritual practice. It does not merely come “before” (as something that would have been lost with the advent of patriarchy), but is still there, frozen, waiting to reassert itself; we only have to slow down, to wait, to catch a glimpse of it. The fantasized parthenogenetic birth of the “new man” would represent the resurgence of this triumphant matriarchy, which in fact has been there all along—preserved in a frozen form.38

When Deleuze introduces the figure of the “pendulum swing” to describe the masochist’s quest for his elusive ideal, he further nuances this detemporalizing tendency within masochism. For while these mythical histories represent the mother as coming either “first” (the pre-Oedipal mother) or “last” (the oral mother, the mother of death), Deleuze always insists that the oral mother of perverse fantasy is “second,” coming between the other two in a pendulum swing that never stops. He figures the ideal neither as the origin nor as the terminus of the pendulum swing—the moment when the inertia induced by gravity brings it to a halt—but as a specific “point” in its arc. This suggests that the ideal is always there just “behind” movement, in between the sensual movements associated with the two poles, like the tableau vivant that suspends movement to isolate a picture or a suspended gesture; or, like the still image at the heart of the moving image: not the reel that gets “jammed,” as in Žižek’s argument, but the still image that subtends and supports the illusion of movement, and so reveals its deceptive or illusory quality.

What I want to question here—and what I believe Deleuze himself wants to question—is whether the very gesture of inserting myth into history, as the evocation of an epoque that is “past,” functions to distance and neutralize it, and so negate the force of the real it constructs. “Beginning” and “end” would both introduce time, and thus the distancing or negation of the real that this temporality implies. In contrast, “first, second, and third” are logical steps or moments (temps logiques), and not chronological markers.

In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud famously maintains not only that the unconscious is timeless, but also that “the abstract idea of time seems to be wholly derived from the method of working of the system Pept-Cs and to correspond to a perception on its own part of that method of working;” accordingly, “this mode of functioning may perhaps constitute another way of providing a shield against stimuli” (Beyond 32). These comments suggest that the very idea of time, as a “defense against stimuli,” is itself aligned with the binding of the drive. When we speak of time in chronological terms, therefore—whether as history, development, or evolution—are we not then adopting the perspective of repression, whether we intend to or not?

Waiting for Death

What then is the temporality that best corresponds to the “primary nature” of the death drive? To the understanding of time introduced by the signifier, the time of “before” and “after,” the event and its consequences, Deleuze opposes the atmosphere of “suspense” and “waiting” that dominates in Sacher-Masoch’s fiction. In suspense, the tension of the moment is extended, stretched out, and preserved, rather than arrested or dissipated; thus Sacher-Masoch can dream of “universal suspension as an Ideal of pure imagination” (35)
But what about “waiting”? If “everything has already happened,” what is the masochist waiting for? I think we find a remarkable answer to this question in the work of the late masochistic performance artist Bob Flanagan, who is a kindred spirit of Sacher-Masoch and especially of Deleuze in more ways than one. Flanagan was afflicted from early childhood with cystic fibrosis, a disease that generally kills its victims as adolescents or young adults. Flanagan, however, lived to the age of 43: a survival he attributed largely to the extreme practices of masochism he engaged in from a young age. In an installation piece called “Video Casket,” Flanagan places a video monitor inside an open coffin where the head of the deceased would normally be laid. The monitor displays a high-resolution video of his own face, calmly blinking at the spectator in real time. On the inside of the coffin lid is an inscription that reads, “I was promised an early death. But here I am some forty years later, still waiting….” This waiting cannot be construed as a “waiting for,” as an eschatology or as an anticipation of a time of fulfillment or realization. Instead, “waiting” is structured as a defiance of time, the temporality of biological life or the time of mortality.

What I want to emphasize in this piece is the still in “I’m still waiting.” This “still” has at least two possible connotations: what is still there (toujours, encore), what endures or remains (where “I’m still waiting” means “I’m still here, still alive, unencumbered by the time of organic life and the life expectancy of disease); but also what is inert or unmoving, as in the still image that Deleuze identifies with the stillness or immobility of the masochistic “frozen ideal.” The two connotations come together in masochistic ritual, where the still or frozen image attests to what is still there, what has been there all along, in and beyond the movement of time. The “still waiting” is opposed by Flanagan to the time of the “promise,” the time of the signifier. It suggests that the medical authorities who “promised an early death”—but also the natural laws of the organism and of the disease itself—are unreliable, defective, unable to keep their promises or to uphold the very notion of time they both legitimate and appeal to for legitimation. The defiance and repudiation of this time might be the best possible example of what is meant by the masochist’s disavowal of castration: a disavowal that has nothing to do with the penis or the “secondary nature” to which it belongs.

It also suggests that far from being driven to death or implying a desire to be killed, the masochist’s fidelity to the drive should be understood as a defiance of death: or at least of the biological death that is the end of all organic life. In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud argues that the “organism follows its own path to death,” and aspires to die in ways “which are immanent in the organism itself” (47). Hence what appears as a tenacity of survival in living things is really nothing more than “the fact that the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion” (47). What if we understood this as a comment not about the living organism (which would be “programmed” to die at a specific moment (for example, following reproduction), but about the subject of the drive? This subject preserves itself for a death that is immanent not to its DNA, but to the logic of the fantasy; it aspires to die only in its own time.

When Deleuze describes this work as a project of “speculative philosophy,” he suggests that Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle—which is so often critiqued for what seems to be its excessive biologism—should be read not as a meditation on natural life, but as an account of its supplanting by “primary nature”: and that it is precisely in this sense that we should understand
the drive to restore an “earlier state of things.” It is thus the work in which Freud articulates most compelling the human being’s radical transcendence not only of death, but of life itself.
Works Cited


1 “Nature, forever in action, forever moving, has of herself what it pleases idiots to award God gratuitously…If matter acts, is moved by combinations unknown to us, if movement is inherent in Nature; if, in short, she alone, by
reason of her energy, is able to create, produce, preserve, maintain, hold in equilibrium within the immense planes of space all the spheres that stand before our gaze and whose uniform march, unvarying, fills us with awe and admiration, what then becomes of the need to seek out a foreign agent, since this active faculty essentially is to be found in Nature herself, who is naught else than matter in action?" Philosophy in the Bedroom 210-211
2 In this understanding, the pervert would be the one who delivers death, or who confronts it in practices of extraordinary risk. Also suggests that “death drive” is an impulse that leads, directly or indirectly, to the death or destruction of the living being. It introduces life/death opposition, Eros (life drive) vs. Thanatos (death drive) that is so dominate at first and in popular reception of Freud.
3 I have modified this translation by substituting “drive” for “instinct,” whenever Freud has employed the German Trieb.
4 “The Economic Problem in Masochism.” Compare Beyond the Pleasure Principle, 64-65. Is it not plausible to suppose that this sadism is in fact a death instinct which, under the influence of the narcissistic libido, has been forced away from the ego and consequently only emerged in relation to the object? It now “enters the service of the sexual function” (for example, overpowering the sexual object for the purpose of the reproductive act).
7 “In Moonlight we finally come upon the secret of Nature: Nature herself is cold, maternal and severe. The trinity of the masochistic dream is summed up in the words: cold – maternal – severe, icy – sentimental – cruel. These qualities point to the difference between the woman torturer and her ‘counterparts,’ the hetaera and the sadist; their sensuality is replaced by her supersensuous sentimentality, their warmth and their fire by her icy coldness, their confusion by her rigorous order” (50-51).
8 “The scenes in Sacher-Masoch have of necessity a frozen quality, like statues or portraits; they are replicas of works of art, or else they duplicate themselves in mirrors (as when Severin catches sight of his own reflection in the mirror”) (69).
9 Masochism is not only distinguished from sadism, therefore, but almost antinomial to it. As an excess of sensuality, sadism always threatens to compromise the masochistic ideal, to swing right past the “freezing point” and suspended scenes that are its ideal toward a “vulgarity” in delivering abuse (Severin’s complaint concerning Wanda) that has nothing in common with the icy discipline the masochist seeks. “In Venus, Wanda only becomes sadistic because she can no longer maintain the role that Severin has imposed on her (‘It is you who stifled my feelings with your romantic devotion and insane passion.’)” (xx).
10 Lucie Cantin argues that the masochistic contract aims at the eradication of what she calls the “field of the Other” (the intersubjective dimension of speech), in the form of an exclusion of demand: “It is as if what must be erased is the signifier’s initial determination by the Other. The signifiers must be reduced to a series of traces of jouissance that must be discovered, revived, or embodied in anyone who proposes to occupy one of the possible positions in the scenario. The demonstration will always aim at proving that one can do without the signifier of the Other’s desire, which only hinders jouissance” (“The Fate of Jouissance,” 177). In seeking to eliminate the risk represented by the partner’s power of consent or refusal, the contract is an agreement expressed in language that paradoxically functions to annul its intersubjective character and the lack or mediation it implies. When Cantin argues that the contract reduces the Other to a pure position, she suggests that the masochist effaces the Other precisely by constituting it as a series of positions, gesture, or traits that would take precedence over the subjects conceived merely as “occupying” those positions or animating those traits (for example, wearing a fur or brandishing a whip), and not as necessitating a detour through demand that compromises the pursuit of enjoyment. The eradication of the Other that Cantin describes thus has two faces: the effacement of the other person as a speaking subject or subject of desire, and in and through this the eradication of the “field of the Other,” the empty locus implied in the address.
11 Deleuze contends that “masochism can be defined neither as erotogenic and sensuous (pleasure-pain), nor as moral and sentimental (guilt-punishment).” Instead, “masochism is above all formal and dramatic,” since “its particular pleasure-pain complex is determined by a particular kind of formalism, and its experience of guilt by a specific story” (109).
12 “In the prologue to Sacher-Masoch’s Galician Tales a character known as ‘the wanderer’ indicts Nature for being evil. Nature replies in her own defense that she is not hostile and does not hate us, even when she deals death, but always turns to us a threefold face: cold, maternal, severe…. Nature is the steppe. Sacher-Masoch’s descriptions of the steppe are of great beauty, especially the one that appears at the beginning of Frinko Balaban; the representation of nature by the identical images of the steppe, the sea and the mother aims to convey the idea that the steppe buries the Greek world of sensuality and rejects at the same time the modern world of sadism. It is like a cooling force which transforms desire and transmutes cruelty. This is the messianic idealism of the steppe” (54).
Note that suspension, and the suspension of time in particular, plays a crucial role in this disavowal. In Deleuze’s words, “The fetishist’s choice of a fetish is determined by the last object he saw as a child before becoming aware of the missing penis (a shoe, for example, in the case of a glance directed from his feet upward). The constant return to this object, this point of departure, enables him to validate the existence of the organ that is in dispute. The fetish is therefore not a symbol at all, but as it were a frozen, arrested, two-dimensional image, a photograph to which one returns repeatedly to exorcise the dangerous consequences of movement, the harmful discoveries that result from exploration; it represents the last point at which it is still possible to believe” (31).

13 “Violette,” cited by Serge André in L’imposture perverse, 126. In André’s words, “her true identification is with a phallic mother with respect to whom all men, beginning with the father, are castrated”; for this fetishist, therefore, castration “is located on the side of man and the father, rather than on the side of woman and the mother” (129). Commenting upon the differences between Sade’s and Sacher-Sacher-Sacher-Masoch’s uses of description, Deleuze writes: “In the work of Sacher-Masoch, imperatives and descriptions also achieve a transcendent function, but it is of a mythical and dialectical order. It rests on universal disavowal as a reactive process and on universal suspension as an Ideal of pure imagination; the descriptions remain, but they are displaced or frozen, suggestive but free from obscenity. The fundamental distinction between sadism and masochism can be summarized in the contrasting processes of the negative and negation on the one hand, and of disavowal and suspense on the other. The first represents a speculative and analytical manner of apprehending the Death Instinct—which, as we have seen, can never be given—while the second pursues the same object in a totally different way, mythically, dialectically and in the imaginary” (35).

14 “Theme of the Three Caskets.”

15 “The Theme of the Three Caskets.”

16 The fantasy of the maternal phallus supports the real of the drive and the specific modality in which the pervert experiences it, in the unlimited or “uncastrated” character of a (maternal) demand that is not mediated or limited by the phallic signifier. The fetish could thus be understood as the figuration of the potency and excess of the death drive, its urgent and superegoic command. The substance of that command is that the subject itself disappear and supersensual….Nature always turns to us a threefold face: cold, material, severe….Nature is the steppe. The representation of nature by the identical images of the steppe, the sea and the mother aims to convey the idea that the steppe buries the Greek world of sensuality and rejects at the same time the modern world of sadism. It is like a cooling force which transforms desire and transmutes cruelty“ (54).

17 “The Mirror Stage,” Écrits 78.


19 Zizek’s reading belongs to a long tradition of assimilating the logic of the fetish to that of the signifier, which is one of the things I want to take issue with. The fetish is understood as a supplement that takes the place of, and so attempts to compensate for, a lack on the part of the real.

20 “Fetishism,” 205.

21 Consider for example Lacan’s famous claim that “Baltimore in the early morning” is the image that best sums up the unconscious. “Of Structure as an Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject,” talk at the Johns Hopkins University, October 1966.

22 The observation that some animals perceive only moving objects suggests that frozenness or immobility interrupts the world of nature, does not belong to the order of existence (not only because it interrupts or mortifies it, but because it allows something else to be made visible).

23 OR: Helmholtz’s work on the Carnot-Clausius principle and the degradation of energy in the field of thermodynamics. The Carnot Theorem results in the idea that despite…


25 If the energetic metaphor of the drive is so powerful, it’s because this is the dominant way we experience the drive: as an excessive energy that needs to find release. The binding of the drive is experienced above all as a discharge of energy; for example, experience an uncomfortable level of sexual tension, and that tension is discharged in sexual activity. This suggests that “energy” doesn’t express the drive, but rather the binding or discharge of drive; the drive is “discharged” or cathexed as energy, but is itself a mental representation.
Hence it is significant that “freezing”—and even Freud’s “inanimacy”—while they do rely upon analogies with physical states—are above all mental representations. The “unbound energies” are aligned with the primary processes, and thus with the unconscious. This suggests that the drive is unbound to the extent that it is purely psychical, having no “physical” or “energetic” manifestations, and therefore no degrading “discharge.” Recall that “demand for work” is one of the ways Freud defines the drive. As “a concept on the frontier between the mental and the somatic,” he writes, the drive is at once “the psychic representative of the stimuli originating from within the organism and reaching the mind [and] a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work in consequence of its connection with the body.” This psychical “work” is not physical or energetic, but mental.

For my analysis of this week, see McNulty, “The New Man’s Fetish.”

Beyond the Pleasure Principle 43.


Difference and Repetition, 111.

But that matriarchate is itself a reaction to an earlier, primitive moment in which the primal father, as the dominant male, rules over the group. In Bachofen’s own account of the different epochs of man, there is no such primary father-dominance; the mother comes “first.” (This is more in keeping with the fantasy of perversion, which always understands the father as a late and entirely superfluous addition).

“Our insight into this early, pre-Oedipus phase in the little girl’s development comes to us as a surprise, comparable in another field with the effect of the discovery of the Minoan-Mycenaean civilization behind that of Greece. Everything connected with this first mother-attachment has in analysis seemed to me so elusive, lost in a past so dim and shadowy, so hard to resuscitate, that it seemed as if it had undergone some especially inexorable repression” (“Female Sexuality,” Sexuality and the Psychology of Love 185-186). Note that this phase is also associated with the maternal superego, in the form of the “surprising, yet regular, dread of being killed (? devoured) by the mother” (186).

From a psychoanalytic point of view this is not false (an exaggeration of the mother’s importance or a repudiation/denial of the father’s role), but rather a perspective that gives priority to the drive itself, and not to the world that is created by the signifying order.

Note how this also allows us to think about things like Christian history, along lines very similar to those pursued by Freud and by Badiou (both of whom emphasize the mother-son alliance as central to this trajectory: Freud in the period before the patriarchy, Badiou in its anticipated future).

Bob Flanagan, “Video Casket” (1994). Part of “Visiting Hours: An Installation by Bob Flanagan in collaboration with Sheree Rose,” the New Museum, New York, New York, September 23-December 31, 1994 (originally presented at the Santa Monica Museum of Art). The exhibition brochure by curator Laura Trippi offers the following description of the show: “Visiting Hours stages Freud’s strange drama of Eros and Thanatos, in which existence unfolds as a ceaseless struggle between the instinct for life and the instinct for disintegration or death. But this appears to be a version interpreted by Pee Wee Herman. The installation is designed like a crazy stage set of a children's residential hospital, replete with a torture chamber lurking amidst the institutional cheer. Here, the dark encounter between the drives for sex and death is framed and buoyed up by a keen wit and a cool sense of the absurd.”