

To Suffer Pleasure: The Shattering of the Ego as the Psychic Labor of Perverse Sexuality

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In this article I advance an alternative exegesis of perverse sexuality that permits an analyst to regard it not from within a state of alarm but with the capacity to recognize perversity's generative potential. Pleasure and pain are often approached as independent experiences that become soldered together under the aegis of trauma or pathology. In this essay, I argue that pleasure and pain are developmentally coextensive phenomena. I rely on Laplanche's theory of infantile sexuality to suggest that the sexualization of suffering is developmentally installed in sexuality's very ontology. Although frequently and reflexively conceptualized in psychoanalysis as a demise of the sexual function, perversity can be, I propose, oftentimes sexuality's *aspiration*. Through its interembodied transgressiveness, perversion recruits the body's materiality to perform meaningful psychic labor: to facilitate the transformation of intergenerational debts we have inherited from others in the form of enigmatic parental and cultural implants into a relationship to oneself.

Let's face it. We are undone by each other. And if not, we are missing something . . . so when we speak about "my sexuality," as we do and as we must, we nevertheless mean something complicated . . . sexuality is . . . [not] a possession, but rather, a mode of being dispossessed [Butler, 2006, p. 24].

ADAM

Adam was 4 years into his analytic treatment when he described the following experience. He and his husband had visited a bathhouse. As Adam hung in a sling a stranger walked into the room. The stranger's whole being screamed abjection: he wore a yellowed, stained jockstrap, his hair was noticeably greasy, and he reeked of cigarettes. Adam found this man ugly, instantly repulsive. He began to feel queasy. However, whereas his husband left the room in disgust, Adam stayed behind, "torn between my repulsion and the desire opening up in my body." My patient not only had sex with the abject stranger but also, he told me, it was the most fabulous, memorable sexual encounter he had ever experienced. When orgasm came, "I exploded into thousands of tiny pieces, was hanging out in space like overheated pieces of dust."

Adam did not at all regret the experience, but he did express acute distress over how the suffering of disgust had so voluptuously potentiated his pleasure. Struggling with the link between his repugnance and the intensity of his orgasm, he vaguely recalled the man to have been extravagantly endowed. I, on the other hand, wondered if size was not being retroactively revised to spare

him the mortification of how disgust, pleasure, and his humiliation over their pairing had been so powerfully welded together. And although I had not been surprised to hear that an extraordinary sexual experience followed his intense revulsion (Kristeva, 1982; Dimen, 2005), I couldn't think cogently about how his sexual pleasure had become so erotically ionized.¹

Analytic time proved that this encounter had been more than just sensually intoxicating: Adam was transformed by it. Intensely curious about how the abjection-humiliation ensemble had potentiated his erotic enjoyment, Adam pursued in the analysis bits of sensation that were strewn into the moments when he had come undone. These experiential fragments could not be gathered into language well: a semihallucinated impression (a fuzzy black object), a distantly reverberating sound (a voice? a cry?), a skin sensation he couldn't place (not a shudder, more like a jolt). Elusive and exceeding representation, these surplus meanings benefited from our exploratory process, which revealed them to be of exceptional value to Adam's treatment.

I selected Adam's material to start us off in the midst of the mess that sexuality is. Or, rather, in the midst of the exuberant, generative, unsettling and challenging mess that sexuality can become when the undecipherable occurs, when one bears the unease of having enjoyed the indignities of sensual pleasures whose memories won't cave under the most strident superego chastisements, delights whose intensity won't shrivel under the thick crust of shame. Psychoanalysis lacks and is in need of sexual theory that maintains a hospitable proximity to such experiences so that we may better understand their psychic significance. In order to navigate perversity's unconscious intentionality and forward reach, we have to recuperate the quintessentially psychoanalytic yet incessantly repressed (Stein, 2006) idea of polymorphous pleasure (Freud, 1905). In its absence, the body that endures a perverse scene is sequestered from the unconscious and, therefore, the examination of perversion becomes a purely cognitive or phantasmatic affair.

This essay is a walk through several ideas that provide an elucidatory framework for conceptualizing sexual experiences like Adam's. It proposes an alternative exegesis of perverse sexuality² that shifts the focus from psychoanalysis' exclusive attention to causative chains and genetic links to becoming able to recognize the psychically productive potential emergent in perversity. If pleasure might evade its ordinary fate of being an "experience dangling in mid-air . . . inaccessible to the analyst's empathy" (Jiménez, 2011, p. 22), analysts and patients might become able to approach perversion with genuine curiosity. An attitude of reflective curiosity may, in turn, allow clinicians to respond to perversion not from within a state of alarm but with the freedom to recognize its formidable capacity for generative psychic work. My hope is that this new theory may soften the grasp of exacting, thought-blocking dichotomies that fuel our disciplinary fixation on perversity as pathology or as the scar tissue of the traumatic past.

¹Revulsion, the philosopher Georges Bataille (1934) and the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) tell us, issues from the impulse to purify oneself. Disgust establishes a taxonomy of cleanliness versus contamination that positions the self as untainted by locating the dirty (psychic) contaminants in the other. For an excellent critical discussion of the important ways in which racial and class difference are constitutive of this dynamic see Tyler (2013).

²Despite its nosological baggage, I insist on retaining the term *perversion* in our psychoanalytic lexicon to capture the phenomenology of sexual experience that involves anguish as well as pleasure. The term *perversion* maintains vigorous ties with the exuberant physicality, with the perplexing and inscrutable dimensions of sexuality in a way that other terms do not. My commitment to this term is a luxury I have only because others have already highlighted that psychoanalysis has not approached perversion with disinterested objectivity (Corbett, 2013) and have strongly critiqued the term's pejorative misuse (Foucault, 1980; Dimen, 2001; Žižek, 2003; Blechner, 2009).

Part I of this essay proposes a novel approach to eroticism’s “vast flora and fauna” (Koestenbaum, 2011, p. 57). It argues that pathways to regarding perversion not as symptom but *as possibility* have been foreclosed by the tight grip that the attachment/otherness binary has had over theories of sexuality. Part II moves to a discussion of the work of Laplanche and of literary theorist Leo Bersani to argue that the sexualization of suffering is *developmentally installed in sexuality’s very ontology*. This lens reveals pain and pleasure to be coextensive rather than independent phenomena. An exploration of the role and psychic economy of transgression will help track how perversity can build the affective density to operate transformationally. Part III considers the nature of the psychic labor made possible by eroticism that veers into the darker territories of pain and suffering. Perverse sexual experiences that feed on shame, fear, pain, humiliation, and disgust, I propose, *aspire* to a shattering of the ego. This rupture allows early parental infusions from which the self is assembled to leap forward, becoming available for reconfiguration in novel and unexpected ways.

PART I: WHAT’S IN A PERVERSION?

Psychoanalysis ordinarily conceptualizes pleasure as the antipode to suffering. Adam’s experience, however, presses for a better articulation of the erotic arc linking the two. With few exceptions (Freud, 1905; Ghent, 1990; Dimen, 2005; Stein, 2008; Laplanche, 2011), psychoanalysis has not fared well when it comes to exploring the coextensiveness of suffering and eroticism. Freud was the first to theorize the two as inherently linked: in his radical *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, he articulated all sexuality as trafficking in aberration: “As regards active algolagnia, sadism, the roots are easy to detect in the normal . . . sexuality . . . contains an element of aggressiveness—a desire to subjugate” (1905, p. 156). Freud was not unambivalent about the revolutionary nature of his proposition. In his text, he darts back and forth between the notion that sexuality is definitionally polymorphously perverse and the idea that component instincts—and other deviations in aim—have to be compressed into genital, procreative coherence if one is to reach sexual health.³ This wavering notwithstanding, his daringly original insight, that sadism—and its variant, masochism (see also Freud, 1924)—are chief components of the sexual instinct, suggests that the infliction and experience of pain are indigenous to psychosexual life.

Freud’s formulation that sadism and masochism are endemic to our sexual constitution has been neglected by many canonical analytic theories of perversion. For the most part, perversion is read as sexuality conscripted into dismal repetitions of the traumatic past⁴ (Bach, 1994; Kernberg, 2012; Novick and Novick, 2012), is deemed to be a problem of character deriving from core destructiveness (e.g., Joseph, 1971, 1982; Steiner, 1982), is approached as the psychotic destruction of generational and gender difference (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1996), or is understood as oedipal dynamics gone awry (Holtzman and Kulish, 2012; Ornstein, 2012). Even analysts who have worked more expansively on the multivalent nature and psychic function of sexual

³For an in-depth discussion of how Freud’s ambivalence in fully abdicating the centrality of perversity in psychosexual life is relegated to the footnotes of the *Three Essays* see Dimen (1999).

⁴This approach has now also widely soaked into popular culture (see, e.g., James, 2012; Perkins, 2012) inflecting patients’ own narratives regarding their perverse practices. As such, they should therefore be treated with caution when they emerge in the consulting room.

perversion (e.g., Stoller, 1986; McDougall, 1995) have tended to overlook the ontogenetic links between suffering and eroticism. Although certainly useful for particular patients, a reflexive clinical stance that treats the continuities between suffering and pleasure as indices of a failure of the sexual function requiring therapeutic restoration (Holtzman and Kulish, 2012) makes it hard to relate to experiences like Adam's without assuming self-destructiveness or even danger.

Additionally, the axiomatic presumption that trauma or pathology always drives perverse sexual scripts can lead to the imposition of narratives that usurp and rewrite our patients' subjectivities⁵ (Guss, 2010). When an analyst's mind rumbles with "regulatory anxiety" (Corbett, 2008), she becomes vulnerable to being unconsciously caught in the defensively mobilized quicksand of colonizing her patients' sexual particularities by "confus[ing] what the patient means to [the analyst] with what the patient means to himself or herself" (Dimen, 2001, p. 833). Such countertransference reactions foreclose the analyst's genuine curiosity and block analytic inquiry into the psychic uses of pleasure that is suffered.

Attempts to evade the clinical minefields of reflexive pathologizing frequently lead analysts to using the relational arrangement within which perversity manifests as the criterion that renders it acceptable. Consider, for instance, the claim that perverse sexual relations are healthy and normal when they are mutually enjoyed *within the contours of emotionally intimate relationships* (Davies in Slavin et al., 2004, p. 404; see also Kernberg, 1998). For Kernberg, a range of erotic behaviors otherwise considered perverse, such as bondage and domination, are recast into playful sexual adventures when performed within matrimony's normativizing confines. Formulations that privilege mutuality and equality (e.g., Benjamin, 1988, 2004) similarly anchor polymorphous pleasure in pathology by singularly focusing on particular relational arrangements: when sanitized with the right amount for concern for the object, perverse practices become joyful, benign pleasures (see, e.g., Benjamin, 2013). One of the problematic dimensions of the taming effects promised by mutuality is how it obfuscates the importance and psychic generativity of sexual pleasure. The primacy of pleasure then places second to more sanitized concepts like *gender* and *sexuality* (Hartman, 2010). Or, as Barthes (1975) puts it, pleasure loses to the more dignified model of *desire*.

Before venturing further into these ideas, let me explain how I employ the term *perversion*. I use *perversion* to designate a *sexual process*—instead of sexual acts—that lives on the cusp of one-person and two-person psychologies and that issues jointly from the materiality of the body *and* from internal experience. It draws on the interpersonal quality of sexual, "inter-embodied" (Hartman, 2010) encounters that are *experienced as* transgressive in a way that destabilizes the subject's psychic equilibrium, pushing her *into* dysregulation, into the too-muchness of experience. As I use it here, perversion is not the sexual manifest of psychiatric illness, nor do I intend it to be socially subversive—although it may be. Perversion is not sexual behavior detached from ethics, yet I am also not proposing that psychoanalysts treat perversion merely as a set of unfairly misunderstood nonnormative sexual practices. The risk of being blinded to the labor perversion performs festers as much in that avatar of our fear, pathologizing, as it does in facile normativizing accounts. The latter too readily forfeit the importance of understanding perversion's unconscious

⁵Obviously, not all clinicians become defensively pathologizing of their patients or affectively dissociated from their own experience when dealing with perverse sexual practices. Countertransference responses to such material are polyvalently mediated: for instance, in treatment milieus (e.g., forensic settings), when the regularity of contact with perversity is encountered by the collective holding of a sensitive clinical team, thoughtful reflection of patient dynamics can be greatly facilitated.

reach. Which acts will be experienced as transgressive varies widely: lines of prohibition are perched on the highly personal divide between the intrapsychic, the social, and the temporal (*who* does *what* in *what context* and at what point in *time*; see Dimen, 2001). For one it may be the shame of anal penetration, for another the disgust of sexual contact during menstruation, for a third the longing to be reduced to begging one's lover.

What qualifies a sexual act as perverse is not the precise script enacted but that transgression and interembodiment work in tandem. The former lures the self into crashing through its own regulatory walls, one's idiosyncratically sutured line of prohibition: the latter inundates the subject with new undecipherable messages from the other (What does this person want from me? What did that look/gasp/touch mean?). Together they create an overwhelming experience of excess (Stein, 2008), of a dysregulating too-muchness that pushes the subject through the homeostatic point that guarantees the ego's coherence. What ensues is an unraveling of the ego (Bersani, 1986) that allows densely encrypted moments and enigmatic states (Laplanche, 1999) sewn into it to come forth.

An analyst's ability to work with the eruptive qualities of sexuality hinges on her capacity to appreciate the significance of the disruptive potential perversion ushers into the ego's coherence. This disruption enlists bodily materiality to perform a particular kind of psychic labor: to turn intergenerational errands (Apprey, 2013) and debts (Faimberg, 2005) that have been installed in us in infancy and which have entered us through the early somatic relationship with our care-takers (Laplanche, 2011) into a relationship to ourselves. I am granting to perversion, then, this rarely understood role: to be the carrier of sexuality's inherent enigma in the resource of the body. If perversion has this demanding task of breaching the psychic register with the material one, no wonder its psychic uses are so radically unthinkable (Bion, 1962). By addressing the emergent potential in the self's unraveling,⁶ my set of propositions treats perversion as a viable sexuality with mesmerizing and incredibly powerful effects. Such disequilibrations, when handled thoughtfully within an ongoing psychoanalytic treatment relationship, as I discuss, may have transformational potential.

The Attachment/Otherness Dichotomy

Adam is not alone in finding pleasure in the pain of humiliation or in the suffering of disgust. Insofar as we all test sexual limits at times, Adam and his perversion "is us" (Dimen, 2001). Take, for example, my patient Aimé, whom some of you will recognize from your own practices (dare I wonder, from your own fantasies?), who is made uncomfortable and yet is spellbound by being slapped by her partner "in precisely the right way" during sex. Think here also of the wildly, instantly successful soft-porn novel *50 Shades of Grey* (James, 2012), an elegy to the heated coupling of pain and debasement with erotic excitement. Or, consider one of the most celebrated novels on erotic submission, *The Story of O* (Réage, 1977), no less well read today than when it aroused controversy more than 50 years ago. The captivating affinity between pleasure, pain, and anguish has been untouched by feminism and social critique (Benjamin, 2013), and that should perhaps trouble our notions of what is ordinary in the sexual sphere.

Suffering is often experienced alongside pleasure not only because the material sexual body can, at times, become a lightning rod for psychic pain (Saketopoulou, 2013) but also because the

⁶On the psychic productiveness of transient fragmentations see also Frommer (2006) and Ghent (1990).

transgressive blend of flesh and intersubjective engagement can render the pain/pleasure matrix a tool for important psyche-soma work. Perversity's unconscious intentionality has been hard to conceive because the psychoanalytic ambience on this topic, or what Guralnik and Simeon (2010) call ideology, has remanded perversion to the dustbin of failed compromise formation. As a result, the often synchronic occurrence of suffering and pleasure has been misconstrued as the welding together of psychic processes that appear to exist in contradiction to each other.

Key to my argument is the way the sanitized dichotomizing of attachment and otherness, as mutually repellent sexual-developmental paradigms, uphold the pleasure/pain division. This split is premised on the construal of polymorphous perversity as originating in the early sensual mother-infant bath and as arising in a way that renders it fundamentally alien to the infantile self. Seligman, for instance, argues that it is the lusciousness of early dyadic bodily contact that lies at the epicenter of psychosexual life (Slavin et al., 2004). Formulations of this sort leave little room in the mutually regulated mother-infant relationship for phantasy-based aggression. Considerations of the early caretaker-infant bond that focus exclusively on attachment (Stern, 1985) can collapse the sexual into pre-oedipal dynamics, landing psychoanalysts in a theory of sexuality where the mysterious plenitudes of the erotic have gone limp (see, e.g., Mitchell, 2003).

This demise of the sexual in analytic theorizing persists despite having been heavily critiqued (Green, 1995; Stein, 1998; Fonagy, 2008). This recalcitrant insistence on desexualizing the caretaker-infant dyad serves a regulating function: to preempt the struggle with the conceptual and lived difficulties that arise when specks of visceral eroticism surface in relationships of care. As Davies (2001) and Target (2007) discuss, parents routinely ignore children's sexual excitement—in contrast to all other affects—to avoid traumatizing them by sexualizing the relationship. This unmentalized affective residue congeals into a claustrum (Meltzer, 1992) of hibernating experiences that can awaken in the erotic heat of sexual transference and countertransference.⁷

Stein's formulations epitomize the anxiety generated when pleasure is theorized. Stein's work rightly insists on the fundamental otherness inherent in eroticism (Slavin et al., 2004). Her position speaks to the astonishing libidinal power of pleasure by addressing how the mysterious in sexuality draws from the unconscious colonizing effects of parental sexuality on the infant. Even for Stein, however, sexuality is required to trade in intersubjective recognition: the libido must not feed on exploitation and it should guard from "deteriorating into obscenity" (Stein, 2005, p. 26). I am not arguing that sexuality *should* be exploitative or entail the other's erasure but I am trying to highlight how such qualifiers point to an underlying fear. Unregulated pleasure is seen as risking anomie, as courting intrapersonal chaos. Mutuality and decency are then summoned to ensure that the pursuit of pleasure does not topple us over into abuse or evil.

As developmental paradigms, *attachment* and *otherness* are obviously not adversarial. Together, they create the complex experience that sexuality is (Salomonsson, 2012). That they are posed as if in binarial relationship to each other, then, is interesting. Binaries, Laplanche (2011) writes, are the hotbed of repression and the attachment/otherness divide is no exception. Although framed as opposites, both paradigms are underwritten by the notion that, when it comes to sexuality, the establishment of limits is crucial to the preservation of order. From the *attachment* perspective, the erasure of sexuality from the parent-infant relationship relieves the need for theorizing limits, whereas the *otherness* angle marks the limit at the ethical line of

⁷Surely, it is in this lacuna that one encounters sexual boundary violations (Dimen, 2011).

mature intersubjectivity and mutuality. In this perspective, regulation is recruited to ensure that pleasure does not collapse us into interpersonal chaos or social pandemonium, that phantasy does not bleed into reality. The Oedipus complex can be read as evidence of how foundational our ancestral fear is that desire runs amok in the absence of regulation.

The role of limits then is one of guardianship: to ensure that pleasure will not disband the Law,⁸ that the internal force of prohibition will not allow sexual excitement to wreak havoc on civilization (Freud, 1905). For Kernberg (1998) polymorphous pleasures procured outside the perimeter of marital relations are sexual maladies. Others, as I discussed, draw the limit promising to stabilize pleasure's dangerousness at the capacity for intersubjective recognition (Benjamin, 1988; Fonagy, 2008; Stein, 2008; Jiménez, 2011). Pitting the limit against pleasure suggests that psychoanalysis has not yet absorbed the profound implications of the idea that embodied sexuality is constructed not against but *through* prohibition.⁹ This lesson, handed down by the Marquis de Sade (1795, 1797), appears in its more contemporary iterations in the work of Foucault (1980).

PART II: TRANSGRESSION'S SEXUAL ALLURE

To understand more deeply the relationship between sexuality and the crossing of limits, psychoanalysis needs to be able to think the limit *with* pleasure, to reflect on the Law not as undermining but as engorging erotic gratification (Bataille, 1957). In other words, we need to be able to think analytically about transgression. In order to explore the role of transgression in the intensification of pleasure, I take a metapsychological detour to the work of the French analyst Jean Laplanche. Laplanche understood sexual sensibility and the self's constitution as intertwined processes. The relationship with the caretaker, he argued, floods the infant with multiple communications (Laplanche, 1999). These messages, always compromised by the adult's own unconscious, permeate minor gestures, nuances of a gaze, muscle tone, acoustic elements of speech. Consider a mother, for instance, who ever so slightly shifts her body posture upon becoming aroused during breastfeeding. Or, a father who applies slightly yet identifiably less pressure on his infant's genitals as he cleans his anus after a diaper change. In these cases, the interembodied "no" of the incest prohibition oozes into the infant's psyche long before it builds representational traction to become thinkable (Bion, 1962). This space between the parent's and the infant's ability to represent experience, which is necessary for subjectivity, installs in us the ineffable (Hartman, 2013).

To this vast and unremitting array of uncanny transmissions that leak *out of* the caretaker and *into the* infant, Laplanche (1995) gave the name *implantation*. The infant is propelled to translate these implants in order to make sense of what radiates out toward her. The ego develops out of this translating process as an apparatus that constructs meaning and binds enigma. And yet the multiple imbalances between parent and infant, which arise primarily from generational difference, render some of these messages untranslatable and enduringly enigmatic. The content of these *enigmatic signifiers*, as Laplanche (1997) called them, is unknown to the adult who is exceeded by her own unconscious. These undecipherable and perplexing communications float

⁸The Law here is not used in its juridicolegal sense but references a set of socially inscribed directives deviation from which invite collective sanctions and which can, in the individual, generate primal levels of anxiety.

⁹This statement is less true of the work of Jacques Lacan, who was quite interested in the amplifactory effects of limits on desire.

inside the infant's psyche unbound by the ego (Laplanche, 1999). Installed in us through our bodies, they dwell inside us on a somatic register always and inevitably exceeding representation, their plenitudes persistently falling out of language.

The failed translation of these signifiers results in an unsymbolized and impenetrable dimensions, which Stein (2008) called *excess*. Deposited in the psyche, excess forms the building blocks of the infant's unconscious and, for Laplanche, of sexuality. The unconscious/sexuality are, thus, established as fundamentally alien to the self, persistently and hauntingly other (Laplanche, 1999). By definition that which we cannot possess, sexuality is never "ours": it is, rather, the way in which we become "dispossessed through the address of the other" (Butler, 2005, p. 54).

From this perspective infantile sexuality is not the manifestation of biology¹⁰ but a function of how maternal subjectivity shapes the infant's emerging subjecthood. "Owing its emergence to the specificity of the adult-child relation" (Laplanche, 2011, p. 37), infantile sexuality arises in the interstices of attachment and adult sexuality. Epigenetic and anchored in the body, it is generated from the sensually excessive mother-infant interaction that is always already parasitized by the adult's unconscious. Attachment, then, is *both* sexuality's condition of possibility *and* the medium through which the parent's radical otherness morphs libidinal development. An especially important aspect of Laplanche's theory is that parental implantations, even when pleasurable—or, I suggest, perhaps especially then—involve in their excessiveness the experience of painful shock. "The necessarily traumatic intervention of the other must entail—most often in a minor way but sometimes in a major one—the *effraction or breaking in characteristic of pain . . .*" (Laplanche, 1999, p. 123; italics added).

This tormenting surge of enigmatic infusions has doubled effects: insofar as it constitutes us as subjects it produces pleasure. And because it imprints itself on a bodily level it is also psychosomatically registered as pain. This process welds pleasure with pain: excess "consumes and consummates us" (Nigro, 2005, p. 345). Sexual excitement originates in the gap between maternal excess and what the infant's ego can bind; *the misalignment between the two is riveting*. Add to this the bodily sensations that arise later in life and we end up with a veritable powerhouse of experience at the foundation of which lie pleasure and pain.

The notion that the caretaker's effractions into the infant's interior space produce excitement comingled with pain has a crucial implication: the pain/pleasure *mélange* is developmentally installed in sexuality's very being. This view may perhaps account for why pleasure and suffering are frequently and fluidly—albeit not unconflictually—encountered synchronically. If, as I described, we view masochistically derived pleasure as the upshot of a complex yet normative developmental process, reflective space opens up to think expansively and inclusively. Regulation could then be considered *with* pleasure, early dyadic experience *with* otherness.

What would it mean, though, to consider psychosexual life as originating in the union of enjoyment with suffering? If masochism and the sexualization of pain arrive long before subsequent trauma accrues or pathological solutions are sought, a new set of clinical possibilities emerges: it becomes feasible, for example, to go beyond an interpretation of perversity as deriving from sexualized self-destructiveness and to wrestle masochism away from repetition compulsion (Freud, 1920; Stoller, 1986). The latter is especially significant because repetition compulsion remains the reflexive explanatory hypothesis in psychoanalysis: upon hearing that patient A likes to be

¹⁰Laplanche (2011) posits that the biological vectors of sexuality only emerge in puberty.

beaten or that B enjoys erotic humiliation, analysts often imagine that at work are unconsciously orchestrated attempts to work through and master early traumatic experience.

There are several problems with resorting to repetition compulsion as the sole explicatory device in understanding such sexual encounters. First, repetition compulsion unquestioningly favors defensive functions over pleasure's emergent possibilities—something to which I return later in this article. Moreover, it treats repetition as the mark of *unprocessed* trauma rather than as a property of all traumatic experience (Cvetkovich, 2003; Reis, 2009). Also problematically, it relies on the superimposition of the past on the present, erasing the intentionality and, thus, the forward reach of the act. This “excess of simultaneity over subsequence” (Seligman, 2009, p. 9) obfuscates the act's futurity—what I refer to here as the *aspiration* of the perverse behavior.

Self-Shattering

When amplified, the interimplication of pleasure/pain can create an experience that leaves the subject “momentarily undone” (Bersani, 1986, p. 100). This unraveling of the self “disrupt[s] the ego's coherence and dissolve[s] its boundaries” (p. 101), an experience that Leo Bersani calls self-shattering. Bersani's arresting theoretical move parts ways with our traditional approach to productive psychic life as resting on integration and synthesis. Recall how, in Adam's experience, suffering and pleasure amalgamated to blow him up “into thousands of tiny pieces . . . hanging out in space like overheated pieces of dust.” The rise in excitation, which arises out of Adam's revulsion and feelings of humiliation, leads to a rupture of the self. Self-shattering may sound like a traumatic psychic event. However, it shares important features with what Bollas calls a *breakdown* (Bollas, 2013), a moment where the self breaks open. As I discuss next, it is conducive to allowing the self to be stitched anew in novel and productive ways.

PART III: LEARNING TO THINK *WITH* PAIN

To explore further the processes that facilitate the psychic work made possible by the self's dissolution, we have to learn to think *with* pain. To accomplish this, I turn to ideas from French philosophy, specifically to the notion of *limit experience*. The roots of this concept originate in the 18th-century philosophical work of the Marquis de Sade and are subsequently elaborated by the philosophers Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, and Michel Foucault.

Sade, who lived during the French revolution, became known for works of sexually sadistic and masochistic content whose philosophical underpinnings have been densely theorized (Lély, 1966; Hénaff, 1999; Phillips, 2001). His oeuvre captured philosophers' interest because of the meticulous attention he paid to how political institutions (i.e., the French aristocracy in its excesses and debauchery) at once defined the limit and invited its transgression. Inspired by Sade's work, Georges Bataille posited that a particular psychic event lies at the transgression of the limit: limit experience.¹¹ To Bataille (1957), the limit marks the line between life and death, with *death* referencing not the end to organic life but a return to a state of uninterrupted belonging. Violent eroticism, Bataille believed, had the potential to disrupt the subject's continuity, wrenching her from herself to hurl her into an uninterrupted state. His contemporary, Maurice Blanchot

¹¹Bataille, in fact, named this *inner experience* but his concept is, for our purposes, analogous to what Foucault later named *limit experience* and I retain it here to maintain a uniformity of referents.

(1969), described it as what one encounters when she has “decided to put [her]self radically in question” (1969, p. 203).

Michel Foucault was profoundly influenced by his encounter with the work of Sade, Bataille, and Blanchot. He theorized experiences of the edge as trying “to reach that point in life which lies as close as possible to the impossibility of living” (Foucault, 1991, p. 31), a decentering of the subject that “uproots the individual from himself . . . where he may be carried to his own annihilation” (translated in Holmes, O’Byrne, and Gastaldo, 2006, p. 325). Sexuality, he thought, is in a privileged position to elicit the subject’s tear from *itself* because, although bodies are always constituted through discourse, they also, always, exceed it (Foucault, 1991).

Perverse sexualities are, in my view, ideally suited for this bid for the ego’s unraveling because the transgressiveness that underwrites perversion runs on an economic regime of escalating excitations. Transgression’s insatiable appetite for intensified stimulation can override homeostatic controls, thus evoking the self’s unraveling. Key to transgressive pleasure is not tension reduction (Freud, 1905)¹² but the welling up of pleasure even to the point of exhaustion (Laplanche, 2011, p. 234). This accretion produces pleasure that is suffered and furnishes perversity with its queer and anarchic potential. Rather than the homeostatic regulation attained through attachment relations (Lyons-Ruth, 1999, 2006) and early cycles of prosodic and linguistically mediated mother-infant interactions (Fonagy and Target, 1996), this vigorous pursuit of sensory experience can become overwhelming, threatening even to the ego’s integrity, facilitating generative dysregulations. When homeostasis is overrun, the ego becomes unmoored and the subject is hurled into the state Bataille described as “uninterrupted belonging” (Bataille, 1957).

There is a variety of conventional theoretical approaches to understanding the “uninterrupted state” psychoanalytically. For Ferenczi (1938) it might be akin to a regression to the thalassal state of continuity between parent and infant, which is achieved through hallucinatory process. Viewed through the prism of Balint’s (1968) contribution the uninterrupted state can be construed as a variant of structural regression whereas Loewald (1980) or Milner (1969) might conceptualize it as a nostalgic return to a primal undifferentiated fusional union with the mother. However, all these hypotheses pivot on the self’s unraveling as a regression that situates the subject in an *earlier* developmental stage of psychic operations. This interpretation misreads the concept of ego shattering. To be sure, ego shattering is best understood as a process where the self is catapulted back in time. However, the point reached is a developmental moment only similar to, *but in fact not structurally identical* with, that earlier time. When the ego shatters, the subject who comes undone is not collapsing into a prior level of psychic organization. To articulate this process and this sort of phenomenon, I have found “involution” (Abensour, 2013) preferable to regression. Involution captures the “headlong [rush] towards . . . an abyss, a chasm” (p. 43), taking seriously the futurity of the act (Seligman, 2009).

To put it differently, the ego is pulled, tempted *toward* its breakdown and collapse, always with forward momentum. To think of perversions as *aspiring* to the unraveling of the ego through the pushing of limits is a methodologically different approach to eroticism’s excitatory potential from that adopted by theories of sexuality which emphasize maternal attunement and mutual regulation of states of arousal (Atlas, 2012). Instead of focusing on identifying and maintaining optimal levels of stimulation that protect the subject from being overwhelmed, the way of thinking

¹²On this point see also Dimen (1999).

I am suggesting follows pleasure to the land of overstimulation; it tracks what occurs in the too-muchness of experience that presses into the unbearable. This approach to masochism recalls the work of Sabina Spielrein (1912), who argued in favor of destruction's generativity, insisting that when viewed this way, "a wish for self-injury, a joy in pain . . . is thoroughly comprehensible" (p. 112). For her, the feverishly escalating reach for stimulation that inheres in destructiveness is not a site of detriment but rather "a cause of becoming."

Why might the self's unraveling be so concertedly sought out? What is often read as compulsiveness in the repeated enactment of perverse scripts (Bach, 1994), what Freud (1905) thought of as the quality of "fixity" in perversion, can be thought of instead as an unconsciously driven yet concerted sexual practice that involves the subject's persistent pursuit of the self's unraveling. If we accept that the subject comes into being through early parental implantations and the excess of cultural meanings that elude the infant's understanding, the ego's breakdown may set free enigmatic implants that had escaped translation. As the ego unravels, condensed meanings that shaped the sediment of the unconscious and of sexuality, *the primal moments where our alienated, divided selves got formed*, leap forward.

When released and able to breathe freely, these enigmatic states may now be revisited. As the subject is developmentally further along than where she was when enigmatic infusions originally entered her, retranslations and new deencryptions of enigmatic messages structuring her unconscious can become possible. Interembodied sexual experience that is powered by transgression's search for escalating excitations has the extraordinary potential to recapitulate the scene of implantation and to set in motion the breaking open of the ego and the release of enigmatic states. Sexual contact carries the capacity to reactivate the originary moments of implantation because, as experience drawing on bodily materiality that occurs transpersonally, it places one in a force field of copious enigmatic messages directed at us by our sexual partners. By invoking the body, the site where the tangle of this kind of normative human enigma has originated, it showers us anew with the other's undecipherable message. This is what makes perversion an ideal site¹³ for the evocation of limit experience and the dissolution of the self.

It is important to emphasize that in this reevocation of the enigmatic there are no *essential* meanings to be recovered (Plant, 2007). The adult whose ego shatters, in other words, does not become necessarily more able to revisit—to return to my earlier example—the moment of the diaper change to decode mother's arousal or father's anxiety. In sexuality, dislodged signifiers are not in search of linguistic representation or of historically factual reconstruction. When the self unravels, enigmatic objects and affects freed through this process do not seek Bionian containment. Neither is the goal to approximate what originally escaped understanding in order to comprehend it better or to articulate it into language. Nor is a historically accurate representation of experience what these moments are about. When implanted during infancy these messages were already bathed in parental excess. Those embodied affects, already inflated with parents' own history, defensive operations, and unconscious fantasy, can never be recovered in their original form.

The potential for transformation lies in the fact that, when revisited by a developmentally more mature subject, such signifiers can become reconfigured on the level of the body, thus allowing

¹³Unraveling is not a property of sexual experience alone. The sociologist and ethnographer Stephen Lyng (2004) has systematically researched a wide range of behaviors generative of limit experience (e.g., extreme sports, drug use, delinquency). He posits that ego dissolution offers possibilities for the modification of not only psychic states but also embodied experience.

new life to be breathed into them. Instead of remaining inside the subject as sediments of the parental other they can be taken more into our own possession. That which has been intergenerationally injected into us can become assembled anew as it becomes rethreaded with personal bits of experience. This reconfiguration applies equally to enigmatic signifiers that arise from the *normative* trauma of implantation (Laplanche, 2011) and to transgenerationally transmitted elements of unmourned personal or historical trauma that saddle an infant of a tormented parent. This transformational process does not have to—and often does not—congeal into language. Errands unconsciously assigned to the subject by her caretakers (Apprey, 2013), which are telescoped through the generations (Faimberg, 2005), can be infused with novel meanings that issue from the subject herself rather than deposited into her from without through attachment relations. A self with greater agency and freedom, one that answers less to parental phantoms of the past, becomes possible. It is in that sense, perhaps, that we can think of masochism as “a circle of freedom” (Butler, 1999, p. 147).

To illustrate this process, let me zoom into Adam’s description of being overheated bits of dust. This moment, which can be understood as the phenomenological correlate of unraveling, runs counter to the conventional psychoanalytic privileging of a well-integrated ego. What’s occurring, however, is not an explosion of unbridled primary process. Adam is not decompensating: part of his ego is agentially in control, focused on and observing his experience while other parts of him are opening up. In this state, which is akin to meditative ones (Ghent, 1990; Epstein, 2004), Adam may be receding as a bounded subject but he is not in psychotic fragmentation.

Exploring this state in Adam’s analysis suggested that the moment of unraveling behaved like a portal: previously incomprehensible fragments of experience permeated by opaque messages leaped forward. Adam’s semihallucinated black object, the indescribable sound, the skin sensation he couldn’t place—all of these might be thought of as carrying embodied enigmatic messages implanted into his psyche. Only as Adam and I were able to sidestep the distraction of the material’s transgressiveness were we able to pay closer attention to these experiential bits. What messages might have become encysted in the sound that was neither voice nor cry? Was his fuzzy black object a carrier of now unrecoverable parental affect? Over time, associative chains formed between these sensory experiences and parts of Adam’s history that he and I had not until then been able to engage meaningfully. The generational debts that inhered in them had not revealed themselves to our dyad in a usable form until Adam and I began exploring the sensory experiences that crowded his shattered ego.

The problem of the psychic representability of unformulated experience is not one of psychoanalysis but of human nature. The excesses and plenitudes of the affective inheritances that travel from one generation to the other—and which are spread through culture—often remain outside the realm of represented experience. Perverse sexualities offer a medium for their evocation that can then be taken up productively in psychoanalytic exploration. Such moments are better served not by analytic activity (e.g., exhuming old signifiers in the search for verbal interpretation) but by a clinical sensibility of receptivity and committed curiosity so that the range of meanings that enigmatic signifiers have held in the patient’s life can be retroactively speculated and worked on. In this way, new self-elaborations can be noted and held in mind¹⁴ by the analytic dyad.

¹⁴It is important to acknowledge that although the depersonalizing effects of suffering facilitate the kind of unraveling that lends itself to new self-elaborations, unraveling may also, at times, produce malignantly destabilizing possibilities. To locate the self’s unraveling exclusively in psychic transformation—as I focused on in this essay—is to overlook that it is not just capacity but also fragility that inheres in limit experience (Tobias, 2005).

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