

Editorial

Suffer (v): to hurt, ache, or to bear, tolerate, permit. *Submit* (v): to yield, or to put forward. *Dominance* (n): control over someone, or the state of being controlled. *Severe* (adj): unsparing.

Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's 1870 novella *Venus in Furs* follows its protagonist Severin on a spiralling journey of self-debasing sexual-submission. Famously abridged in the Velvet Underground song of the same name, it's from here that we get the term 'masochism': the tendency to derive pleasure from pain or humiliation.

This idea tingles with the abject, with the blending of feelings we like to keep separate, whose distinction seems so much like safety (or hygiene). Pain and pleasure. If we can't see these as opposites, aren't we an intrinsic risk to ourselves? Doesn't that situate the enemy within our own desires, the longed-for within the monstrous?

Like the Freudian concept of the death-drive in a tangled dance with our drive to survive and enjoy, Severin speaks to a deep and unsettling ambiguity, threatening our boundaries, blurring the lines we use to navigate. One extreme looped back onto another like a tail into a mouth.

Pain/pleasure. Day/night. Life/death. Suffering/ecstasy. We rely on oppositions like language, for patterns and paths, for a sense of empowerment, directions to take. But so often opposites moonlight as lovers. What we understand of ourselves is always half in the dark. *Want* is a labyrinth, riddled with blindspots.

Perversion? Fetish? Kink? Fantasy? The games and contradictions of the erotic are easily marginalised ('behind closed doors'). We shut the bedroom, turn the key, pull the curtain, switch off the light. The red light is a carnival. But masks reveal as much as they hide...

Religious ecstasy sought through suffering. Mantras of 'no pain, no gain' in pursuits of self-improvement. The relentless cycles of exposure and judgement in the system of celebrity (*'I'll do anything'*). Torture porn and revenge thrillers. The thrill of risk and its market. Cravings for the smack of firm government. Respect for the whip. Discipline as stability. Take back control. (Submit to the publication, give yourself over to the author...) The masochism-mechanism refracts, a shimmer in the dark.

How do our feelings about suffering splinter – whether witnessed, endured, inflicted, idealised, or over-familiar – and what does this do to the edge between ourselves and others? What does punishment have to do with redemption? Agony with achievement? Discipline with comfort? What does submission relieve us of? How far will we go for power, or to sense our own limits? And underneath it all, how much do fear and desire really have to do with each other?

Purge, sanction, atone. Austerity, penance, catharsis. Throughout culture, throughout our day-to-day, domination and suffering are not things we consistently avoid, and pleasure is not something we straightforwardly seek. We have a tendency to be torn.

Pain wears pleasure's clothing, pleasure dresses up as pain, and both intertwine in an echoing underground drama: the erotics of power and submission. And with the game so dazzling, the noose so tight, the costumes so stirring, the script so exciting, do we always even realise we're playing?