

Masoch, Mill and the Morality of Masochism

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Abstract: “The aim of this article is to discuss Masoch’s moral views from his book ‘Venus In Furs’ by analyzing the relationship between Severin and Wanda, in which he is voluntarily enslaved by her. Masoch’s views on love, nature and slavery are discussed, as well as Mill’s views on slavery contracts. A comparison between Mill’s and Masoch’s views on slavery contracts is also provided. I also discuss Masoch’s views on women that emerges in the book suggesting that he is inside the tradition of male authors that are in favour of the equality of rights between sex”.

Key words: Masoch, masochism, slavery contracts, nature, women

Resumo: “O objetivo deste artigo é discutir a visão moral de Leopold von Sacher-Masoch em seu livro “Vênus das Peles”, através da análise da relação entre Severin e Wanda, na qual ele é voluntariamente escravizado por ela. Discutimos aqui a visão de Masoch sobre o amor, natureza e escravidão e comparamos as visões de Masoch e de John Stuart Mill sobre contratos de escravidão. Discutimos também a visão de Masoch sobre as mulheres que emerge no livro, sugerindo que o autor se enquadra na tradição de autores masculinos que é a favor da igualdade de direitos entre os sexos

Palavras-chave: Masoch, masoquismo, contratos de escravidão, natureza, mulheres

1. Masoch and the morality of love

Leopold von Sacher-Masoch was born in 1835 in Galicia and died in 1895. From his surname came the name of the sexual behaviour called *masochism*. His main work, *Venus in Furs*, is part of a cycle of Masoch's works called *The Heritage of Cain*¹, whose purpose was to treat the themes of love, property, money, the state, war and death. *Venus in Furs* forms part of the first volume of the *Heritage of Cain*, which deals with the subject of love.

Venus in Furs is basically a dialogue between two characters: Wanda and Severin. The kind of relationship that is established between them is one of slavery, namely, Severin is enslaved to Wanda. However, and this is the interesting point, Severin consents to be enslaved, ultimately he chooses to be her slave. But until they arrive at this point (the point of contractual slavery) there is a long and refined process of approach and seduction.

First of all they discuss the meaning of love and the question of faithfulness. Wanda's theory (whispered in a Severin's dream when she appears as Venus, the goddess of love, in *Furs*) is that love is always related to pleasure and has nothing to do with duty. According to her, a woman is faithful as long as she loves, but there is no point in being faithful without love. She says:

You modern men, you children of reason, cannot begin to appreciate love as pure bliss and divine serenity; indeed this kind of love is disastrous for men like you, for as soon as you try to be natural you become vulgar. To you Nature is an enemy...Stay in your northern mists and Christian incense and leaves our pagan world to rest under the lava and the rubble. Do not dig us up; Pompei was not built for you, nor were our villas, our bath and our temples. You do not need the gods – they would freeze to death in your climate. (Masoch, 1870/1991, p. 145)

When finally Severin meets the goddess of his dreams she becomes provocative, suggesting that he shares a view that love, and particularly women, are hostile forces and men have to be protected from them. This is typically a modern view. She, on the contrary, admires the serene sensuality of the Greeks - pleasure without pain - and does not believe in the love preached by Christianity and modernity. She defines herself as a pagan. Severin replies to her:

¹ Masoch has never finished his project and only two of the volumes were completed.

(...) We moderns can no longer tolerate the carefree philosophy of the ancients, especially in matters of love. The idea of sharing a woman with others...is revolting to us. Like our God we are jealous. (Masoch, 1870/1991, p. 160)

Wanda's answer is again provocative. Despite holy ceremonies, oaths and contracts, she says, no permanence could ever be imposed in love; it is the most changeable element in our transient lives. She realises that the individual who revolts against the institutions of society is immediately rejected and ostracised, but recommends to take the risk and act accordingly. She says:

(...) My principles are deliberately pagan; I wish to live as I please, and as for your hypocritical respect, I prefer happiness. Whoever invented Christian marriage was right to have invented morality at the same time. I do not for a moment believe that I am eternal; when I take my last breath, and life on earth is at end for Wanda von Dunajew, what difference will it make to me whether my pure spirit joins the choirs of angels or whether the dust of my body produces new beings? Since the time will come when I shall no longer exist in my present form, what is the point of self-denial? Shall I belong to a husband I no longer love, under the pretext that I once loved him? No, I shall deny myself nothing, I shall love everyone who attracts me and give happiness to everyone I love. (Masoch, 1870/1991, pp. 160-161)

To Wanda, love is by nature changeable. It is impossible to guarantee that people will love the same person during their whole life. Christian marriage, however, is based on this idea (the idea of permanency), which is an unrealistic idea, and so should be discarded. But it is not just love that is not eternal; life is not eternal as well. If it is so, if we are all condemned to die, there is no point in being faithful. The essence of love, as well the essence of life, is not to be eternal. If there is no eternity, there is no reason to people act as if things were eternal. If love always ends, there is no reason to be faithful any longer, because there is no reason to continue being faithful to someone that one does not love. The essence of love is to end, and so faithfulness is an illusion. People are faithful and should be faithful only while they love. The same happens with morality. If life is not eternal, if one day we all will die, why should we abstain from pleasures in the name of being faithful? Why should we stick to Christian morality? The idea that seems to be involved here is that if nothing is eternal there is no point in acting as if the world were eternal. If the nature of things and the nature of love is to arrive at an end, there is no reason to avoid to live a hedonistic way of life in which the only important thing is to live for pleasure and personal happiness. It is only after this discussion

about love and faithfulness, in which was established Wanda's views about these subjects, that Wanda asks the astonishing question: "Do you want to be my slave?"

Severin's answer is also astonishing. In matters of love there is no equality, he says. If I were faced with the choice of dominating or being dominated, I would choose the latter, is his comment. After that Severin says that he is in love with Wanda and that he is suffering. Then he asks to marry her. Wanda's answer is:

Well then, frankly speaking, I do not think I could love a man longer than...

A year?

Good heavens, no. A month perhaps. (Masoch, 1870/1991, p. 167)

Wanda points out the inconsistency of Severin asking her to be his wife and offering himself to be a plaything to her, and Severin's answer is just that he loves her. He recognises that his love of her becomes *a kind of madness* and that the idea of losing her ("that I may well lose you one day") is a constant torture.

Actually Severin's reasoning is not inconsistent and has a quite similar form to Wanda's reasoning. He desires her and he wants to be with her for the rest of his life, but he knows it is impossible since she admitted her unfaithfulness. Severin wants a long-term relationship, he wants a kind of *eternal relationship* (eternal at least during the life) but he knows that it is impossible. There is no possibility of permanency in their relationship because Wanda is aware that love is not eternal and because of that she does not want to be faithful and to promise faithfulness. So, he decides to be her slave:

Oh, it must never end! I cried, beside myself. Only death shall part us. If you cannot be mine entirely and forever then I want to be your slave, I want to suffer anything to be able to stay by your side. (Masoch, 1870/1991, p.170)

The intention of Severin is not just to accept slavery in order to be with his beloved. It is more than that. Severin recognises perfectly the nature of things, how the world is, but refuses to accept it. Severin looks for a durable relationship, looks for an eternal love and a virtuous woman, but he is rational enough to recognise that love is not eternal and that a

perfect virtuous woman is an illusion². At the same time he refuses to look for a common relationship, because to engage in that would be to succumb to nature, would be to effectively accept the way that the world is. But Severin does not accept that. He wants eternity, he desires a different world so intensively that he prefers to adhere to a radical and unexpected behaviour -to become slave- in order to show his displeasure, rather than to engage in a common relationship, namely, a relationship based on lies and pretences reinforcing the way that the world works. This is why he says:

There are two kinds of woman that I can love. If I cannot find a noble and spirited woman willing to share my destiny in complete faithfulness, then give me no half-measure, no lukewarm compromises. I prefer to be at the mercy of a woman without virtue, fidelity or pity, for she is also my ideal, in her magnificent selfishness. If I cannot enjoy to the full love's perfect bliss, then let me empty to the dregs its cup of bitterness and woe, let me be ill-treated by the woman I love, and the more cruelly the better. For this is also a form of pleasure. (Masoch, 1870/1991 p. 171)

Severin moves from one extreme to another. There is a "reasoning of extremes" and an "ethos of extremes" that is always subjacent in Severin's thinking and behaviour. "No half-measures, he says, if you cannot be a true and loyal wife, then, be a demon". Why ask for that? Why not just tread the road of common relationships in which people are not totally virtuous, but also are not cruel? Because it would mean capitulation to the world like it is and to a hypocritical way of life. Hypocrisy is something that is in the middle between true morality and absolute super sensuality. When Wanda asks Severin why he despises a friend of hers, for example, his answer is "Because she is a hypocrite. I have time only for a woman who is truly virtuous, or who openly leads a life of pleasure". His experience with hypocrisy is described:

I then fell in love with a most respectable woman who pretended to an inaccessible virtue, but who finally betrayed me with a rich Jew. You see, because I was sold and betrayed by a woman who affected the strictest principles and the most refined sensibility, I developed a hatred for poetic and sentimental virtue. Give me a woman honest enough to say: I am a La Pompadour, a Lucretia Borgia – she is the woman I will worship. (Masoch, 1870/1991, p. 176-177)

² It is said that Diogenes of Sinope, the cynic, went about in broad daylight with a lighted lantern in Athens, looking for an honest man. Like Diogenes, Masoch, through Severin, looked for a woman truly virtuous and did not find her.

Severin will never give up the model of virtue that he is looking for. Aware, however, of the impossibility of finding in real life a woman who fits this model, he will prefer the opposite extreme, a super sensualist who disdains traditional morality and assumes her nature. If the ideal is unattainable, he will prefer to live a totally true life and take all consequences of this, even if the most profound truth is to understand that nature is cruel. The ideal of virtue is substituted by the ideal of truth, but it has a moral purpose because assuming the strange behaviour of agreeing to be bitten, whipped, enslaved and cruelly treated, he, at the same time, shows the immorality of nature.³ If he had not assumed this behaviour, if he had adopted the normal posture of a common life, he would be both acting as a hypocrite and accepting the way that nature works. The *existential rebel* Severin would never do that.

Wanda, then, represents the ideal that is achievable, the ideal of truth that is nothing else than cruelty (“lying is contrary to my nature, she says, but what man is brave enough to take the truth?”). Actually Wanda (representing Severin’s idea of woman) is the personification of nature, and to Severin, nature, as well as women, are enemies as Wanda noticed (“you modern man, you children of reason...!”). According to him:

Sensuality took on a sacred quality, indeed it seemed the only sacred principle, and woman in her beauty became something divine, since she was called upon to perform the most important function in life, the continuation of species. Woman seemed to be the personification of Nature, she was Isis, and man was her priest and slave; she treated him cruelly just as Nature casts aside whatever has served her purpose as soon as she has no more need of it. (Masoch, 1870/1991, p. 179)

Nature, as well as women, is not moral in Severin’s view. He wants them to be moral, but they are not. If it is so, let us show this cruelty (“what bliss to be her slave!”). This is the *reasoning of extremes* that Severin takes. It leads him to a conception of life that is profoundly rebellious, complaining against the way that nature works, and is deeply anti-hypocritical, criticising the way that people behave in society, disguising how they really are. Slavery, then, has to be understood in this context. It is an *extreme concept*, the result of the Severin’s reasoning of extremes. Slavery in this situation represents an existential attitude that is

³ It is said that the cynics assumed that a life according to nature is proper at all times. Such life is the way that they used to criticise conventions and social custom. Masoch seems to go further and puts in question the nature itself. To agree to be cruelly treated is to agree to be submitted to nature and its forces. In doing that, however, all the absurdity that exists in nature is showed.

rebellious and anti-hypocritical *par excellence*. Severin asks to be enslaved and cruelly treated and it just happens after he realises that Wanda will not marry him and will not be faithful to him. The analogy with nature is perfect here. Aware that nature is not moral he decides to surrender to cruelty. This surrender, however, does not mean conformity, it is just a way to experience and at the same time to demonstrate how cruel is nature and in so doing show how much he is discontented with nature and how much he desires another kind of world, an ideal and more virtuous world.

2. Nature, women and the slavery contract

The relationship between Wanda and Severin evolves almost naturally in the direction of an agreement on slavery, a *contract on slavery*. Firstly, Wanda draws up a contract by which Severin commits himself on his honour to be his slave for as long as she wishes. When he complains because the contract only mentions his duties, she answers:

Naturally! You are no longer my lover, and therefore I am relieved of all duties and obligations toward you; you must regard my favours as pure benevolence. You can no longer lay claim to any rights, and there are no limits to my power over you. Consider that you are little better now than a dog or an object; you are my thing, the toy that I can break if it gives me a moment of pleasure. You are nothing, I am everything, do you understand? (Masoch, 1870/1991, p. 196)

It is Wanda speaking, but it could very well be the voice of Nature. Nature has absolute power over us, human beings, and we the whole humankind, could very well be called her toys, her dogs⁴. If we take seriously the already mentioned Severin affirmation that women are the personification of nature we can read the following passages with this in mind: *“I sometimes find it disturbing to be so totally at the mercy of a woman. With all the power in her hands, what if she were to take unfair advantage of my passion?...Everything rests in her hands; if she wants to betray me, she can. How exquisite is this agonising doubt! You may*

⁴ See Laertius, 1925. According to Laertius *people* think that the Cynic school derived its name from the gymnasium of Cynosarge (White dog), frequently used by Antisthenes. However, there are other theories to explain the name. Donald R. Dudley (1937), for example, says that there are four reasons to explain why the cynics were so named. First, because of their way of life (as dogs they were used to eat and make love in public, sleep in tubs and at crossroads). Second, because dogs are shameless animals and the cynics make a cult of shamelessness. Third, because dogs are good guards and cynics guard the tenets of their philosophy, and finally because dogs can distinguish between friends and enemies like the cynics recognise as friends those who are suited for philosophy while drive away the unfitted by barking at them. Coincidence or not, in *Venus in Furs* Wanda many times compares Severin to a dog.

treat me as you please, but do not reject me". What is the meaning of rejection here? To be rejected by the woman that he loves and who enslaves him would be the end of the game. Be rejected by nature means to die. When we die there is no more game, no more submission, no more slavery. But who wants that? None! Human beings want to continue to live "*The comic side of my situation is that I can escape but do not want to; I am ready to endure anything as soon as she threatens to set me free*". The comic side of our human situation is that we can escape but we do not want to. Nature is cruel, treats us like toys and we are at her mercy, but we do not want to die, we want to survive!

In fact we all, since we have been born, have established a contract with nature. The idea of contract, however, implies in essence, some kind of consenting. People are free either to sign or not to sign contracts. Nature has all power over human beings, like Wanda in *Venus* has total power over Severin, but there is always the possibility to break it. Human beings can commit suicide as well as Severin can abandon Wanda, even after he has signed the contract. Severin considers the hypothesis. He even writes and sends her a leaving letter. He realises that he has no money to leave Florence, but immediately he reminds himself that he can go out on foot ("I take a few steps, then stop once more. She has my word, yes, I have sworn to be her slave for as long as she wishes, until she sets me free; however, I do have the right to kill myself"). When he considers that, he represents, for a while, all humanity and our destiny:

I sit down and draw up an account of my existence; I review the whole of my life and find it a sorry affair: a few joys, and infinite amount of boredom and futility, and in the middle, a well of grief, anguish, disappointment and vain hopes. I think of my mother whom I loved so dearly and whom I saw die of a dreadful illness, of my brother who perished in the flower of his youth, without ever tasting the pleasure of life; I think of my dead nurse, of my childhood playmates, of the friends who studied with me, of all those who are lying under the cold earth. I think of the turtledove that used to come cooing and bowing to me instead of going to his mate. All is dust and returns to dust. (Masoch, 1870/1991, p. 256)

Severin is thinking about the non-sense of life and considering killing himself when he slides into the river. He saved himself however clutching a branch while as in a vision the woman that wretched him appears smiling before him. In fact the woman that causes suffering is the same that saves. Nature, responsible by punishing humanity, is the same that brings us to life. Severin went back home when Wanda had already received the letter in which he declared his intention of leaving her. The dialogue between them is short:

Why didn't you leave?

I murmur something that neither she nor I can understand

"Oh, you have no money," she exclaims. "Here!" And she tosses me her purse with a contemptuous gesture

I leave it on the ground. For a long time we are both silent.

"So you do not want to go?"

I cannot. (Masoch, 1870/1991, p. 257)

Severin cannot abandon his torturer, just as human beings cannot leave life, even if it is torturing. We are all committed with nature, in a fundamental contract. This fundamental contract seems to be exactly what the masochist wants to keep forever. Actually, as Deleuze points out, the contract is essential in masochist behaviour:

The sadist is in need of institutions, the masochist of contractual relations. The Middle Ages distinguished with considerable insight between two types of commerce with the devil: the first resulted from possession, the second from a pact of alliance. The sadist thinks in terms of institutionalised possession, the masochist in terms of contracted alliance. Possession is the sadist's particular form of madness just as the pact is the masochists. It is essential to the masochist that he should fashion the woman into a despot, that he should persuade her to cooperate and get her to sign. He is essentially an educator and thus runs the risk inherent in educational undertakings. (Deleuze, 1991 pp. 20-21)

The masochist contract, however, is one that people have always the opportunity to breach. In this fundamental contract between human beings and nature we always have the opportunity of killing ourselves, which would mean the end of the game, the breaking of the contract. In the masochist contract this possibility is always present however tyrannical the clauses are. Severin realised that he could kill himself, but he did not. He even had the opportunity to leave Wanda, who even offered money to him. "I cannot go," he said. Why he cannot go? Why he does not simply give up the game? Probably because he is totally attached to her. "I love you, Wanda" is the expression most repeated by Severin. He loves her so intensely that he prefers the immense suffering that he is experiencing rather than to lose her. The same happens with human beings who are so profoundly attached to life that they prefer

to continue to suffer in life than to put an end to their lives. The strange love that Severine has for Wanda is like the strange love that humanity has for life.

Considering these points it is possible now to analyse in more detail the supposed tyrannical contract signed by Severin in which he renounces his claim to any rights. Actually there are two documents to be signed. The first one is the following:

Agreement between Mrs. Wanda von Dunajew and Mr Severin von Kuziemski. Mr Severin von Kuziemski ceases from this date to be the fiancée of Mrs Wanda von Dunajew and renounces all rights pertaining to this state; in return he undertakes, on his word as a man and a gentleman, to be the slave of this lady, until such time as she sets him at liberty.

Mrs von Dunajew may not only chastise her slave for the slightest negligence or misdemeanour as and when she wishes, but she will also have the right to maltreat him according to her humour or even simply to amuse herself; she is also entitled to kill him if she so wishes; in short, he becomes her absolute property.

In return, Mrs von Dunajew promises, in her capacity as his mistress, to appear as often as possible in furs, particularly when she is being cruel toward her slave. (Masoch, 1870/1991, p. 220).

The second document is a declaration of suicide: *“Having been for many years weary of existence and the disappointments it brings, I have wilfully ended my useless life”*. (Masoch, 1870/1991, p. 221) There are many points to be noticed here. The first one is that the contract is signed in Italy, a country without slavery at that time. When Severin asks whether or not the contract would be signed in Constantinople, Wanda says that there is no point of having a slave in a country where slavery is common practice (“I want to be the only one to own a slave”). Then she recognises that the law is unnecessary to enforce the contract (“If we live in a cultivated, sensible, Philistine society, then you will belong to me not by law, right or power, but purely on account of my beauty and of my whole being”). On the other hand, the declaration of suicide is very powerful because it means that she could really take Severin’s life and not to be punished by law, making the supposed murder look like a suicide. There is an ambiguity here that seems to be part of the masochist universe as Deleuze pointed out by saying that in masochism the contract is caricatured in order to emphasise its ambiguous destination (Deleuze, 1991, p. 92). In fact the contract is not guaranteed by law but it does entail a compromise (when Severin considers leaving Wanda he remembers that he had given his word). It is so serious that it forces a situation in which a crime can be

committed. It takes away all rights of the slave, but the slave seems to have all opportunity to escape. It seems to be, at the same time, a joke and the most serious thing in the world.

Actually if we go back to the idea of a *fundamental contract* mentioned before we could have the interpretative key to the masochist contract. It seems that it reproduces the way that life is. Human beings are at the mercy of nature in a way that appears like slavery. Nature can treat all of us badly, promote sickness and suffering, and, at the end, will kill each one of us. At this time of human development it is impossible to escape death! However, at the same time human beings have all the opportunities to commit suicide but the huge majority of people do not do that. The masochist contract on slavery, in reproducing that, seems to remember all the time the fundamental condition that we are all experiencing in the world. Wanda offers to provide Severin with the means for him to leave her, but he prefers to continue with her. Severin will abide by the contract forever and at this moment he represents the whole humanity.

Another important question in a contract on slavery (like the one between Severin and Wanda) remains. Is it ethically acceptable to alienate freedom? Is it ethically acceptable to a person to use his/her liberty in order to discard it? John Stuart Mill carries out a discussion on slavery contracts. He says for example:

In this and most other civilised countries, for example, an engagement by which a person should sell himself, or allow himself to be sold, as a slave, would be null and void; neither enforced by law nor by opinion. The ground for thus limiting his power of voluntarily disposing of his own lot in life, is apparent, and is very clearly seen in this extreme case. The reason for not interfering, unless for the sake of others, with a person's voluntary acts, is consideration for his liberty. His voluntary choice is evidence that what he so chooses is desirable, or at least endurable, to him, and his good is on the whole best provided for by allowing him to take his own means of pursuing it. But by selling himself for a slave, he abdicates his liberty; he foregoes any future use of it beyond that single act. He therefore defeats, in his own case, the very purpose which is the justification of allowing him to dispose of himself. He is no longer free; but is thenceforth in a position which has no longer the presumption in its favour, that would be afforded by his voluntarily remaining in it. The principle of freedom cannot require that he should be free not to be free. It is not freedom to be allowed to alienate his freedom. (Mill, 1859/1989, pp. 102-103).

In Mill's view, clearly, contracts on slavery are *wrong* and the main reason for this is that in such contracts people allow to be alienated forever from their liberty. People who

agree to abdicate their freedom loose even the opportunity of repentance and the chance of being free again. Considering that people change their minds, to permit someone to take a decision in a particular moment of his/her life that would compromise his/her most important condition of being in the world for the whole remaining life, would be totally wrong. Besides that, it seems that Mill, with this consideration about how much liberty is inalienable, is trying to avoid a perverse social system in which people are obligated to alienate their most precious good (liberty) in order to guarantee subsistence. Mill's considerations are totally appropriate, but immediately lead us to the discussion about the slavery contract as proposed in *Venus in Furs*. Would Mill object to this contract?

Theoretically the answer is "yes". When Severin agrees not to have rights any longer and to be a slave of Wanda until the moment she desires, they are making an agreement that is the kind of agreement that Mill is objecting. Ethical objections, then, based on Mill's liberty theory could be made to this contract. However, and this is the point, how serious is the contract between them? As we have said before, it was signed in a country without slavery, making it null. Besides, Severin had all the opportunities to leave Wanda. These two facts are evidence showing us that this contract on slavery is nothing but a joke. A dangerous joke, as already said, but still a joke. It does not mean that it has no importance. Severin gave his word and he is worried about keeping it. There are both moral and psychological commitments between the parts, and it makes the contract to be respected, but in the end of the day they are attached only by their desire, only by the will that both have to live the relationship they are living. Actually, they are playing a game that can be stopped whenever one wants and if it is so, Mill's objections cannot be applied. Severin is as free as before he signed the contract. The contract is just a part of the game and does not entail any obligation beyond the time it is being played, with the free concurrence of both parts. The obligation that it seems to entail, making Severin Wanda's slave for the whole life up to the moment that she desires, is an illusion, it is also part of the game (and again we have the analogy with life. Life is nothing but a game that we play as if we were eternal, but at the same time totally aware that we are not).

Could there remain ethical objections to the contract under the argument that while they are engaged in practices such as bondage, humiliation and whipping, harm is being caused to those who are suffering these actions. A classical Mill statement is the one in which he says:

The only part of the conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign. (Mill, 1859/1989, p. 13)

The practices described in *Venus in Furs* carried out by Severin and Wanda seems to fit in this Mill's principle. If there is some harm being caused no one is being affected apart from the person who consented to be submitted to these actions. Since it is so, no one, even the state has the right to interfere. If we generalise this reasoning it can be said that masochistic practices, since they are agreed among adults, should not have to be subject to law or intervention of the state. Wanda's words at the beginning of the work seem to teach something to us. "You northern take love too seriously. You speak of duty where it is purely a question of pleasure", she says. This apparently frivolous observation contains a not frivolous idea that there is a field of human behaviour, the field of sexual relationships, in which desire is sovereign and duty is excluded. In sexual relationships everything should be allowed since they are agreed among adults.

A final question that has to be dealt with is the question of gender that is raised in *Venus in Furs*. Masoch inverts the traditional position of women in society. Women have been dominated and subjugated by men through the history. In *Venus in Furs* it is a woman that dominates a man. It could be said that it is still a wrong way of treating questions of gender because what is looked for in this dominion is equality and respect for the differences and this is not the way that Masoch treats the question, since his conception is that there is a natural enmity and hatred between sexes. When we look at the final passages of *Venus in Furs*, however, we realise that there is much more than that to be said. Discussing what is the moral of the tale, he (Severin or Masoch) says:

1. Woman, as nature created her and as man up to now has found her attractive, is man's enemy; she can be only his slave or his mistress but never his companion.
2. This (his companion) she can only be when she has the same rights as he and is his equal in education and work.
3. For the time being there is only one alternative: to be the hammer or the anvil.

The conclusion, the moral of the tale, is that he was fool enough to let a woman enslave him and that whoever allows himself to be whipped deserves to be whipped. He learned the

lesson! “No one will ever make me believe that the sacred wenches of Benares or Plato’s rooster are the images of God”⁵ (Masoch, 1870/1991, p. 271)

When we analyse the moral of the tale, it can be noticed that sentences 1 and 3 are together. In a kind of a “Hobbesian state of nature” related to relations of gender, there is no possibility of an equal relationship, without domination. An equal relationship only can be achieved in a time that women will have the same rights as men and the same opportunities. In short, Masoch is saying that the necessary conditions of an equal relationship between man and woman are political and economical and that these conditions have to be changed in order to improve these relationships. The principle of perfect equality between the sexes that the classical liberal Mill, for example, pursued (Mill, 1869/1989) admitting no power or privilege on one side, is also Masoch’s ideal. When Masoch finally recognises that “the sacred wenches of Benares” are not the images of God, he finally recognizes that women are not in the divine plan, above men, nor that they are as cruel as nature. They are as human as men and thus they should be equal to them. It is the ideal of the equality of sexes that clearly emerges in the final pages of the book, finally revealing the true - and moral - face of his thoughts and teaching.

In *Venus in Furs*, however, Severin assumes this posture only after he experienced all the sufferings at Wanda’s hands, until the point that she abandons him after submitting him to be whipped by his rival. When the game is finally over and he is abandoned, he learns the final lesson. The educator that Deleuze mentioned made of his life a teaching. If nature, as woman, is man’s enemy, to live a life according to nature, totally submitted to her power is foolish, as it was “shown” by his example. Then, the ideal of equality of sexes came up as well as the recognition that we should not allow to be dominated by the forces of nature (“whoever allows himself to be whipped deserves to be whipped”). It is again the rebel that appears. Severin now show his discontentment with the world like it is, but nothing indicates he will fight for a new order. His example is already his fight and his teaching.

The experience of slavery, physical suffering and humiliation is the source of all teachings in Masoch’s approach. Suffering he lives according to nature, because nature is always cruel, and at the same time he shows how profoundly discontent he is with this

⁵ In a footnote in the first edition of *Venus in Furs* (Masoch 1870/1991, p. 271) it is mentioned the story that Diogenes threw a plucked rooster into Plato’s school and exclaimed “Here is Plato’s man”. Actually there are many vestiges of cynicism in Masoch’s approach in *Venus in Furs*. The life in accordance with nature (a life that Severin lives submitting freely to suffering) , the critics to conventional values and to the hypocrisy of society and the idea that people learn from the despising of pleasure, are three ideas that were present in the cynic Diogenes of Sinope.

submission, that is the fundamental condition of humanity. In living according to nature, he demonstrates the nonsense of it. Through this life in reverse, like a cynic, he changes the currency and passes his message that is both moral and existential. He is in favour of equality of the sexes, liberty, and against the appalling power that nature has over human beings. But in relation to the latter, there are very few things to do in order to change the situation.

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